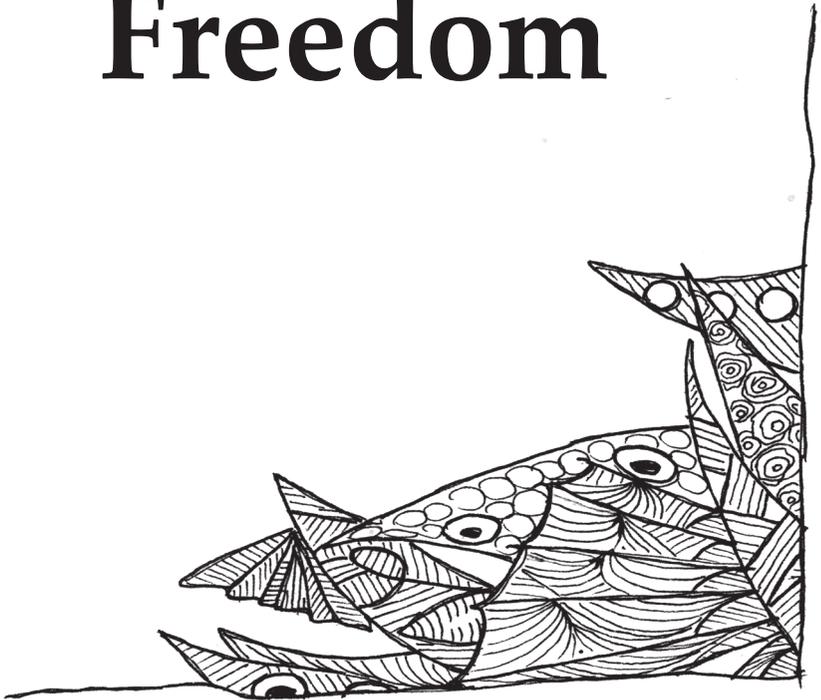


# The Price of Freedom





*“Judged by English standards the Irish are a difficult and unsatisfactory people. Their civilisation is different and in many ways lower than that of the English. They are entirely lacking in the Englishman’s distinctive respect for the truth . . . many were of a degenerate type and their methods of waging war were in most cases barbarous, influenced by hatred and devoid of courage”*

**Record of the rebellion in Ireland, 1920–21 (Jeudwine Papers, Imperial War Museum)**

*“If the persons approaching (a patrol) carry their hands in their pockets, or are in any way suspicious-looking, shoot them down. You may make mistakes occasionally and innocent persons may be shot, but that cannot be helped, and you are bound to get the right parties some time. The more you shoot, the better I will like you, and I assure you no policeman will get into trouble for shooting any man.*

**Lt. Colonel Gerald Brice Ferguson Smyth, June, 1920**

*“It is not those who can inflict the most but those that can suffer the most who will conquer.”*

**Terence McSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork Inaugural Speech  
March, 1920**

*“Our freedom must be had at all hazards. If the men of property will not help us they must fall; we will free ourselves by the aid of that large and respectable class of the community - the men of no property.”*

**Theobald Wolfe Tone - 1798**

*".....our part  
To murmur name upon name, As a mother names her  
child  
When sleep at last has come on limbs that had run wild.  
What is it but nightfall? No, no, not night but death;  
Was it needless death after all?  
For England may keep faith for all that is done and said.  
We know their dream; enough to know they dreamed and  
are dead;  
And what if excess of love bewildered them till they died?  
I write it out in a verse -  
MacDonagh and MacBride And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be, wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born."*

**From Easter 1916, W.B. YEATS**

## **Cork City,**

*Early June 1920*

Cornelius Barry or Con as he was known to his workmates and friends was a strongly built man, short in stature, handsome features with a receding hairline he accepted with amusement and equanimity. "Good men always come out on top," he would joke with those who teased him. He was a quiet man, a man who minded his own business, kept himself to himself, not really needing the affirmation of friendship. Yet he was well liked and indeed well known in the Blackrock parish.

Without doubt it was his daughter, Eileen, who was his pride and joy. Over the years there had evolved a deep, blossoming friendship between the two, full of mutual admiration and respect. From an early age, he had seen in her something of himself, an undemonstrative intelligence, a reflective train of thought, a way of looking at the world and wanting to alter it to a shape they both recognised within themselves. Her beauty, gained from her mother, was something that charmed and delighted him. He watched her growth, saw in her an instinctive capacity to build close companionship with her school pals. She possessed a sensitive empathy that made all her friends feel safe in her company.

Con from early on had made a vow to himself that all her abundant talents would be nurtured and fostered, if he could help it. It was through hard work, taking three jobs on a day, that he had shepherded her through the 'Ursulines' and then on to study Art at University College Cork. For Con the hardships and difficulties he endured to make this possible were borne lightly. His reward those moments in the day when he could sit with his daughter as she explained excitedly to him what she had discovered.

Mattie, his son, took care of himself. He was always an active boy and rarely about the house. Any time Con saw him he had either a hurley or a fiddle in his hands and was heading off on his bike to the training pitch or the Franciscans. Con felt that Mattie was raising himself and saw the deep influence on him of his boyhood friendship with Michael Hays, now calling himself

Micheál. Con reflected on this with a grin, a mixture of pride and amusement.

He remembered with delight Eileen's return from the Irish College last summer a woman, no longer a girl. She had started a romance with Micheál and it was captivating to see them with one another since. Con was thrilled for Eileen. He had seen for years the crush she had on Micheál and it was gratifying to see it come to fruition. They were childhood sweethearts, really, like himself and Mary. Con saw the signs.

He was slightly concerned that Mary would find Micheál's faith a problem, him not being a Catholic, but that could wait for later. He liked Micheál and had seen for years that he was a good lad and now had become a fine young man. He also saw the sadness in his eyes. There was no doubt Micheál had it very tough, losing his Ma, brother and Da all in such a short space of time. And in such terrible ways. Tough for anyone and so to his credit that Micheál was turning out to be such a good young man.

Con liked that he and his son Mattie were best of friends. Whenever he could find the time, he would turn up at a Rockies game and watch quietly from the sidelines as they played their hearts out. He was proud of his son at those moments. Mattie was Mattie, he thought and would be alright.

Because of all this, Con was largely a contented man, still in love with the woman he married all those years before. Mary and he were an undemonstrative couple. Those who knew them well could easily see the devotion which they lavished on their children. Mary had developed a deep piety after the children were born. She regularly attended mass at the Poor Clares convent on College Road. Con didn't mind that at all. He saw her contentment, even if occasionally he worried about her scruples; That she may not be able to cope with the ambiguities that certainly would come their way through their children's more liberal and open development, a product of the changes which had enveloped the city.

Con's work gave him immense satisfaction. He had learned carpentry from his Da and was supremely gifted around wood and possessed a deftness to create functional yet aesthetic pieces

in the smallest of spaces. Because of this, he was always in demand for extra work to complement his employment at Passage dockyard.

He had been employed at Passage for the past twenty years and had seen and survived its many changes. In the early years he worked in the saw mill and suffered as a consequence, the noise of the heavy machinery damaging his hearing and leaving him partially deaf. It was an affliction which he had learned to live with and had afforded him a kind of peace and protection from the world. Happily he had been transferred to the relative peace of the joinery five years previously and this had suited his creative talents well.

Con loved the early morning and evening journeys on the train from Blackrock to Passage and as a Corkman had a fierce pride in the beauty of the line which skirted the river estuary all along its route. Those moments in the day were a time for reflection, for himself, as he gazed out the window of the carriage and took in the passing landscape and the changing seasons.

He had tried to shut out the growing tension that had overtaken the city in the last few years. Earlier this year, he had, along with others, been horrified by the murder of Tomás McCurtain, the popular Lord Mayor of the city. People said it was the RIC that did it, as a reprisal, bursting into his house in the early hours of the morning with blackened faces and shooting him dead in front of his wife and children.

He had seen photos of the children since. He could not take in fully the measure of this outrage and hid it carefully in the back of his mind. Terence McSwiney was elected to replace McCurtain as Mayor but the growing tension remained, unabated. Con feared for his children in the middle of all of this. He could see they were becoming politicised, their time in the Irish College, which he had supported wholeheartedly, had turned them, at a very young age, into ardent idealists. He suspected that Mattie had already joined the Volunteers and knew there was little he could do to dissuade him.

Cork was alive. There was a vehemence about the people that had transformed everything. They were charged now, beginning

with the execution of the 1916 leaders and certainly after the murder of their own Lord Mayor. It was almost as if the city had become a republic, all in its own right, ungovernable, certainly to the British. It was not in Con's nature to rise to such provocation though. In his heart he dreamed of a different Ireland and this was why he was investing so much effort in his daughter. He felt that was contribution enough.

In the last month, things had taken a turn for the worst. Platoons of British soldiers had arrived in the city, a dishevelled lot, and had begun to throw their weight around. They had been assembled from the four corners of Scotland, England and Wales. People were avoiding them and there were stories of beatings and cruelty not heard before. They were getting a nickname for themselves; 'Black and Tans' on account that they didn't seem to have regular uniforms but strode about in a mixture of army khaki and police navy blue.

Whatever their name, Con was aware that they were dangerous, that they took on anyone wherever they found them and there was no telling what would happen after that. Because his various jobs took him all around the city at all times of the day and night, Mary had become afraid. He had to promise her he would be careful.

It was early evening when he got off the train at Blackrock station. The sky was murky with a light mist covering everything. His plan was to make a quick detour to a big house on the Marina on his way home to price a job which he had heard about that day at the joinery. At the top of Blackrock Road, he heard the bells of Shandon calling out six o'clock. He stopped where he was for the Angelus. Con was not a religious man, but neither was he one to upset tradition and that everything stopped for the Angelus had been deeply ingrained in him since his childhood. He now used that time to think of Mary, just small moments when he remembered her kindness and devotion to himself and their children over the years. The comfortable home she had made for the three of them. It had become the punctuation in his daily routine. Having forgotten the words of the Angelus over the years, he replaced them with 'Hail Marys' the words quietly and repetitively intoned in his head. The Shandon bells were tapering off the sixth tone as he finished the final Hail Mary "Holy Mary,

Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, Amen."

On opening his eyes, he saw the dreaded 'Black and Tans' ahead, standing by their Crossley tender, smoking, just waiting. He couldn't tell whether they had seen him or not. He felt a menacing atmosphere in the air and didn't want to hang about. He changed tack and set to double back where he had come to find another way home. He shoved his hands into his pockets, trying for all the world to affect a 'devil-may-care' mood. The last thing he wanted to do was to run into these fellows. It was for Con a fateful decision.

The 'Tans' had seen him. Not liking the way he turned around, they shouted to him to "get your fucking hands out of your pockets and put them in the air." Con didn't hear and oblivious to the drama behind him walked slowly on, continuing to act as nonchalantly as possible. Within seconds, the 'Tans' opened fire and brought him down. They sprinted the hundred yards towards him, guns at the ready and when they reached him found him dead, blood rippling from his prostrate body, seeping out over the pavement and roadside.

The evening had closed in around the scene. It was as if a sudden and eerie darkness had descended, one of those summer days which through an abrupt freak in the weather turns everything to Autumn. Neighbours heard the gunshots and ran out onto the street. Seeing Con's prostrate body lying on the ground, the crowd was overcome with rage.

"Fuck you, you bastards."

"Go back to where you fecking came from."

"Leave him alone, you Gobshites."

"You fucking murderers."

Recognising the danger, the 'Tans' ran back up the road to their tender and sped towards the city, deserting the scene, with a dawning realisation that from now on everywhere, everywhere in Cork, was enemy territory to them. It was a cataclysmic moment. They had brought the war to Blackrock, to Cork city. They had

left behind them, slain like a dog, a true son of the parish and the city, a simple, honest, unassuming, good man. The people would never forget this. The people would not forgive this. By that one arrogant, stupid act, they had sewn to the wind. In the months to come, they would reap the whirlwind.

Maureen O'Sullivan was broken in two when she saw Con. Good, kindhearted Con, who wouldn't hurt a fly, lying there, prone, his lifeblood oozing out onto the pavement. "Mary will be in bits," she thought.

"Go up to Riverview, boy, and tell the family," she told her son Séamus.

The young lad, although overcome by the dread of what he had seen, ran fiercely up the road to the Barry household. His heart was pounding inside him as he tried to focus, everything he did done out of simple repetition, one thing after the other, one leg driving another, away from the bleak scene of devastation, but knowing he was the harbinger of a terrible revelation. When he reached Riverview he ran up to and pounded on the front door, trying to get his dreadful task over with as quickly as he could.

He screamed "Mary, Eileen, Mattie, come quickly, Con's been shot."

Eileen opened the door to the ashen-faced young lad and like a punch in her gut immediately knew that her life had changed irrevocably and irredeemably. Her mother came out of the kitchen and seeing the boy and Eileen let out a deep wail and collapsed to the floor. Chaos followed for Eileen. All she wanted was to run as fast as she could to be at her father's side but here before her was her mother, crumpled on the floor, deep, deep, soundless sobs racking her body. Cleft in two, Eileen reached down to hold her mother and Mary's body dissolved in her arms. She held her there for what seemed like hours, all the time trying to wake up from this terrible nightmare into which she had been plunged. She knew this is where she had to be. She could not leave this broken woman's side, now, not at this moment, perhaps not ever again.

Eileen did not remember when Mattie came home. She saw the disbelief in his eyes when he heard what had happened and the speed with which he turned round to head out and up the

Blackrock Road. She only remembered his return hours later, an utterly changed man. Then there was a deep darkness in his eyes which Eileen had never seen before. As he entered the house, a rage and anger coursed through his body and his very being. Eileen could not look at him. She became very afraid of the transfiguration taking shape before her eyes. It was a moment that would come back to haunt her.

Mattie did not look at her, nor his mother nor the gathered neighbours and family in the kitchen; gathered there to comfort Mary. He rushed past Eileen and up the stairs to his room. He emerged minutes later with a revolver. A revolver!!!! Eileen was stunned. How did Mattie have a revolver?

“No Mattie, No. No. No Nooooo!!!!” She screamed and held onto him as he wrestled to get her away.

“I have to get them,” he screamed. “I can’t let these bastards get away with this.”

As he forced her away and reached the open doorway of the house, Tom Hales appeared before him, Micheál by his side. Hales grabbed Mattie and took him outside as Micheál saw Eileen and rushed towards her, held her in a deep, long comforting embrace. For the first time, she let it all out, the anguish, the pain, the bewilderment, the awful nightmare of a night, the descent into hell, the terrifying thing that had befallen them. Sobs coursed through her frame, tears streaming down her face, her life and being macerated by the unfolded horror. Micheál was helpless, could say nothing, he just held her and murmured over and over again “Mo Stóir, Mo Stóir.”

At the front of the house, Mattie was engaged in a fierce argument with Tom Hales.

“I have to find them, I can’t let them get away with this. What did my Da ever do to anyone. I got to kill these bastards.”

“You are a soldier now, Mattie. You have to think strategically. You have to think of the cause.”

“Fuck the cause if they can get away with killing my Da.”

“Mattie, Mattie, you know what we have to do. You know what Collins is saying. We have to create mayhem for the fuckers. But, Mattie, to create mayhem means we have to be disciplined. We can’t go off half-cocked. Those fuckers are experienced, they have better weapons. We will catch them, don’t you worry. But not now.”

“You promise.”

“Yes Mattie, I promise. Look, I have been on the phone to Collins himself already. He knows about the situation. Don’t worry, we will take care of everything, you, your family and them.”

Mattie began to calm down but his face was set in stone.

“But I don’t want you to lose how you are feeling, Mattie. We will use that. Don’t you worry.”

The night passed. Somehow, with the help of neighbours, they managed to get Con back from the morgue and laid him out in the front room. He looked peaceful, somehow and that helped Eileen and Mary to say their goodbyes.

That night, the night before the removal and funeral, Eileen sat up with her Da, after her Mam had gone to bed. She felt an intimacy with him as she knelt beside the bed where he was laid out, in that small front room where they had spent so much time together, each little ornament and framed picture evoking in her a remembrance of things that had passed and would be no more.

A certain light had gone out of her life, this strong man, this simple man. She knew she had the privilege of knowing him like no other, the deep genetic bond that was carved out in both of them, granting them, during the now too short a time they had together, a symbiosis, a recognition sometimes spoken, sometimes felt, of a shared and desired world totally at odds with the one which was being conceived by the machinations of powerful men. With tears flowing, she thanked this wonderful man for bequeathing to her that insight and determination.

Dawn arrived and the funeral took place at St Michaels. The family and parishioners wanted it to be small, a local community

saying goodbye to this good man. They resisted the cry to make Con a hero or symbol and for that Eileen was deeply grateful. After mass and the burial in the small church cemetery, family and neighbours came back to the house.

True to his word, Tom Hales had laid on the Guinness barrels, sandwiches, crúibíns and bottles of Paddy. Con was given a rare old send-off. Mattie was restrained, organised and acting with dignity took the lead in honouring his Da. There was a coldness in him that Eileen and Micheál found shocking. They had not seen him shed a tear and after the display of wrath which had overtaken him as he left the house on that fateful night, he had since seemed measured, calm, an ethereal distance consuming him. Gone was the winsome, effervescent Mattie that charmed. This current and very present incarnation was cold, calculating, seemingly indifferent to all around him.

They set up with musical instruments in the kitchen and the dancing spread out into the backyard overlooking the River Lee. It was the last time Mattie and Micheál played with one another. They dug deep into their reservoir of tunes and one after another without a break in between, they kept the dancers dancing and moving, generating an evening to remember, a sign, a monument, a shrine, a memorial, a cromlech in melody to a good, simple man gone from this earth to receive his reward.

During the course of the evening, Eileen remained strong, greeting the neighbours and listening to their many stories, reminiscences, reflections about her Da. Their kind words like a balm as she was carried along by a wave of love and affection. Towards the evening's end, she knew what was required of her. She felt compelled to give back, to send family, friends, neighbours out into the night abounding with reflection of the man who had shaped her. He had always loved "The Bantry Girl's Lament" and could be found whistling it while he worked. Now, she stepped forward to sing it, sweetly, falteringly to those who had come to mourn; As a gift to them,

*"Ah who will plough the fields now and who will sow the corn,  
And who will watch the sheep now and keep them neatly shorn,  
The stack that's in the haggard unthreshed it may remain,  
Since Johnny, lovely Johnny went to fight the king of Spain"*

Family and friends gathered around, shaken, moved by the courage of this young woman, seeing her as if for the very first time. Most were found weeping silently, touched and cleansed as the words of the song rolled over them, their spirits inexplicably lifting as Eileen, without faltering, continued,

*“At wakes and hurling matches your likes we’ll never see,  
Until you return again to us a stóirín óg mo chroí,  
And won’t you trod the buckeens who show us much disdain  
Because our eyes are not so bright as those you’ll meet in Spain”*

Micheál could see the immense effort this was taking from her and made to move forward. Then he saw Mary Barry rise from her seat and join her daughter. With their arms around one another, bolstering one another, they continued their homage to their man. Eileen could feel her Ma’s heartbeat, fast, a woman unused to garnering such attention. The symmetry in their voices couching the words in an embrace of love and tenderness, Ma’s eyes closed, her heart open for the first time since that fateful night as she came home to herself,

*“If cruel fate will not permit our Johnny to return  
This awful loss we Bantry girls will never cease to mourn  
We’ll resign ourselves to our sad lot and die in grief and pain  
Since Johnny died for Ireland’s plight in the foreign land of Spain”*