

The Kents of Bawnard

Brendan Hoare, 2007

The Kents belonged to the farming community and farmed 200 acres at Bawnard in Castlelyons, County Cork. Their father David died in 1880, leaving their mother Mary (née Rice) to raise the family, consisting of seven sons and two daughters, alone. The Kents worked hard on the land and were deeply unhappy at being under British Rule and having to pay rents to a landlord.

Times were tough and, not long after their father's death, twins James and John emigrated to Boston. Soon afterwards, Thomas and David joined their twin brothers in Boston, where Thomas found employment with a Catholic publishing and church furnishing firm. Thomas became very well known in Irish cultural circles as he became director of the Philo-Celtic Society's journal. Thomas studied the Irish language and worked extensively to promote Irish cultural activities in Boston.

While the brothers were in Boston, tensions were rising back home in Ireland between landlords and their tenants, resulting in the Land War. David returned home to take part in the campaign for tenants' rights and he became a very active member of the Land League, along with his brothers Edmond, William and Richard. While Thomas was still in Boston, his uncle Richard Rice was evicted from his farm at Coole Upper. The whole estate was put up for sale by the landlord Peard and Richard Rice, as well as his sister Mary Kent, were amongst the farmers who wished to purchase their respective farms. At a meeting of the local branch of the Land League in Coolagown churchyard on 13 June 1889, all of the tenant farmers agreed that they would not purchase their respective holdings until Richard Rice was restored to his farm. Richard Rice negotiated with Peard but they failed to reach an agreement. A month later, the farm was sold to Orr McCausland and it was subsequently managed by a Scotsman named Robert Brown.

This resulted in a boycott of Brown and the Kents were amongst the main organisers of this boycott. Intimidation began at a fair in Fermoy, on 20 June 1889, when an unsuccessful attempt was made to prevent the sale of McCausland's pigs. In the following two days, Brown's fences at Towermore were knocked down and on 28 July Brown was assaulted at Coolagown Cross on his way home from a religious service in Fermoy. On the same day, the Castlelyons and Coolagown Branch of the Irish National League called a special meeting for the people to "show by their presence that they do not approve of land-grabbing, and that the land grabbers will have to glut their greed elsewhere than in Coole", as advertised by a public placard. It is reported that this meeting was attended by 200-300 members and was addressed by both Edmond Kent and Richard Rice, as well as by local priests. As the organisers intensified their boycott of Brown, his employees quit working for him and were given financial support from National League funds. As a result, Brown found it very difficult to buy and sell livestock, as well as having difficulty in buying food and provisions in Fermoy. As a result, Brown had to be supplied by the military in Fermoy.

By the end of August 1889, the police began to take action against "the conspirators" Edmond, David, William and Richard Kent. The four brothers were all arrested and charged with conspiring to boycott the produce of this farm. Due to the impending trial of his brothers, although in poor health, Thomas decided to return home. Trials opened on 9 September 1889 and continued until 16

September. In his evidence, an RIC Constable from Killavullen said that, while he was on duty at the fair in Fermoy on 5 August, he observed how Mr. Brown was followed through the pens by David Kent and Richard Kent as he tried to buy sheep. As a result, he was only able to make one purchase at the fair. It was stated that when Brown left the fair, the Kents departed also. The witness said that he heard David Kent say “we will follow and boycott wherever he goes” to a fellow League member.

At 2.30pm on 17 September, the Court was adjourned until 4pm, when the Kents and their fellow defendants returned to hear the magistrates’ verdict. The magistrates were late returning and disorder was caused in the Court as the defendants began passing loud remarks. Some of the remarks about the magistrates’ business connections with Clonakilty were met with laughter from the assembled crowd in the gallery and a struggle broke out as the police singled out some of the crowd because of this laughter. The comments continued in the absence of the magistrates and the police forcibly removed some people from the gallery. At one point, Edmond Kent stood up and shouted “God save Ireland, boys” before beginning to sing the national anthem out loud. All of the defendants joined in, as did some of the crowd. The magistrates rushed in but couldn’t be heard and were ignored. The singing continued for ten minutes until Gardiner, the senior magistrate, ordered silence or the court would be cleared of all but the defendants. Fr. O’Dwyer shouted “we’re off too” and all of the defendants made a charge for the door. A struggle ensued and the defendants were returned to their seats to hear the magistrates deliver their sentences. On the first charge of boycott, Edmond and William were both sentenced to imprisonment for four calendar months with hard labour, while Richard was acquitted due to his youth. On the second charge, in relation to the Fair at Fermoy on 5 August, William and Edmond Kent would each have to enter into bails of £50 and two sureties of £25 each or go to jail for 3 months. David Kent was imprisoned for three calendar months and to be kept to hard labour, and at the expiration of that time shall enter into bail of £50 and two sureties of £25 or go to jail for 3 further months. All of the defendants refused to pay bail and were committed to prison. At 6pm the prisoners were transferred from the courthouse to the railway station under the escort of police and soldiers. When approaching the station, the police and soldiers were confronted by an angry crowd and the police used their batons to clear the way through the crowd. The prisoners were transferred to a third class carriage at 6.20pm and were escorted to Mallow. The prisoners were transferred to the Cork train, which left Mallow at 7.30pm, and from there they were taken to Cork Gaol. The Lord Mayor of Cork regularly visited the prisoners here and saw to it that daily reports on the state of the prisoners’ health appeared in the Cork Examiner each day. Nationalist newspapers always referred to the men as political prisoners. The prisoners’ appeal was heard at Midleton Quarter Sessions on 2 November 1889 and it lasted four days. The Kents’ convictions were confirmed and their sentences remained unchanged.

When one of the prisoners, Fr. O’Dwyer, was released from prison on 28 March 1890, Richard Rice, Thomas Kent and other National League members met him at the prison. David Kent was also amongst the prisoners released on this day. On 2 April, Fr. O’Dwyer returned to Castlelyons and on Sunday 6 April he said his first public mass since his imprisonment. William Kent slept overnight in the chapel to ensure that the chapel doors remained closed. On one particular occasion, the police broke into the church after they had been refused entry. Summonses were issued against a number of people, including both William and Thomas Kent, and they were arrested under the provisions of Coercion Legislation introduced by the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Arthur James Balfour. A trial followed in June 1890, which lasted four days. William and Thomas Kent were already in prison, on

separate charges of intimidation arising out of the campaign, at the time the trial opened. On this new charge of conspiracy, Thomas Kent was imprisoned for two months with hard labour. William Kent appealed his sentence of six months. The appeal was heard on 11 July at Fermoy Quarter Sessions and his sentence was upheld.

In September 1890, Fr. O'Dwyer was transferred from Castlelyons and the National League declined in the area. The Parnell Split came and the Kents left politics. It was about this time that Thomas became actively involved in Irish language and culture once again and he joined the Castlelyons branch of the Gaelic League and also the GAA. He also joined the newly founded Pioneer Total Abstinence Association. Through the Gaelic League, Thomas did much work in promoting Irish music and dancing. He was also a successful poet and took part in local dramatic productions. Richard was the athlete in the family and he was quite well known having won many hurdle and weight-throwing contests.

Upon the introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill in the House of Commons, unionist opposition to Home Rule in Ireland intensified and the Ulster Volunteer Force emerged in January 1913. This alarmed Irish nationalists, including the Kents, as William later recalled how the brothers discussed the developments in Ulster. The Ulster Volunteers threatened to march from Belfast to Cork and the Kents decided that if they carried out this threat then something should be done to stop them. The Irish Volunteers was founded at a public meeting in Dublin on 25th November 1913. The Cork Corps of the Irish Volunteers was formed two weeks later at City Hall and the Kent brothers decided that they would play an active role in the organisation. The Kent brothers enrolled in the Irish Volunteers and began organising in the Castlelyons and Fermoy areas. Many local Irish Volunteers in Castlelyons and Fermoy fired their first practice shots in the wooded areas around Bawnard House, with a miniature rifle owned by the Kents. The Castlelyons Branch was the first known teetotal branch of the Irish Volunteers in Ireland. When World War One came, in 1914, a split emerged in the Irish Volunteers over the issue of the Irish Volunteers joining the British army. John Redmond, the leader of the Home Rule Party in Ireland, supported the idea of the Irish Volunteers joining in the hope that, after the War, the British would then grant Home Rule to Ireland. This view, however, was not supported by many within the Irish Volunteers and this led to a split within the organisation. The Kents saw British army recruitment in Ireland as an act of treachery and they sided with the Volunteer group that was under Eoin MacNeill's leadership. With Britain at war in Europe, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) leadership saw an opportunity to plan an uprising in Ireland. Training of the Irish Volunteers intensified and a campaign of recruitment commenced in March 1915.

Fermoy was an important garrison town in the south of Ireland and therefore it was very difficult to organise in the town itself. However, the countryside around Fermoy proved to be fertile ground for Thomas Kent's recruitment efforts. Thomas, along with Terence MacSwiney, addressed crowds after Sunday mass, as they travelled from village to village recruiting for the Volunteer movement. On 1 August 1915, Thomas Kent led a group of local Volunteers, which included his brother David, to Dublin to attend the funeral of the Cork Fenian, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. At the burial in Glasnevin Cemetery, Thomas Kent listened to the famous oration of Pádraig Pearse.

On one particular Sunday in October 1915, Thomas and David were involved in organising the breaking up of a British Army recruitment meeting in Dungourney. Thomas Kent marched his men, mostly from the local hurling team, through the meeting and through the village, breaking up the meeting. On that same day, the Dungourney Company of the Irish Volunteers was formed.

On 2 January 1916, Thomas Kent and Terence MacSwiney addressed a public meeting in Ballynoe. RIC members present on the day reported both Kent and MacSwiney and they were both arrested on 12 January. Both men were left in prison without charges being brought against them, until a number of Irish Party Members of Parliament raised the matter in the House of Commons and they were eventually charged with having made seditious speeches at Ballynoe, before being released on bail on 16 February. Thomas was acquitted on this charge, but was now a marked man and a week later he was arrested again, this time charged with being in possession of arms and ammunition at his home in Bawnard. On this occasion he was found guilty and sentenced to two months in prison, before being released in April 1916.

As Easter approached, Thomas, who was Commandant of the Galtee Battalion of the Irish Volunteers, was unaware of the actual plans for Easter Sunday and he was informed that Volunteer headquarters would give him orders when his unit was required. These orders never came, however, and the Kents first found out about the rebellion in Dublin through reading the newspapers. They immediately prepared themselves in anticipation of orders from Dublin and they decided not to sleep at home, as they feared being arrested. As the days passed by, the Kents received no call to arms and on 1 May they found out that the rebellion in Dublin was over.

The brothers felt that it was now safe to return home to Bawnard House and they decided to sleep there that night. However, in the early hours of 2 May 1916, the Kents' house was surrounded by a group of RIC policemen, who were conducting a round-up of leading Volunteers. The RIC policemen shouted to the Kents that they had orders to arrest the whole family. According to William Kent, the family, armed with one rifle and three shotguns, decided to resist arrest as they were "soldiers of the Irish Republic". At this point, the police reacted by firing several shots at the house, to which the Kents reacted. The conflict lasted about three hours, during which Head Constable Rowe was shot dead as he read the Riot Act. Other members of the RIC were also wounded. Among the Kents, David was very badly wounded, as he lost two fingers, and suffered a nasty wound to his side. The RIC policemen realised that it would not be easy to overturn the Kents and they called for reinforcements from the army barracks in Fermoy. The Kents put up a brave battle, but were eventually forced to surrender when they ran out of ammunition. The Kents came downstairs and were assisted out of the house, through a window in the breakfast room, by the military. The police immediately handcuffed Thomas and William. David was given first aid by a military doctor and Richard, who wasn't yet handcuffed, tried to escape by jumping over a nearby hedge. Richard was fired at and fell, fatally-wounded. Thomas and William were lined up against a wall of the house and the RIC were going to shoot them both until a military officer stopped them and instead took the two brothers as prisoners of war. Soon after the surrender, an tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire arrived, and attended to the injured David and Richard, before they were taken to Fermoy Military Hospital in an army lorry. Thomas and William were marched to Fermoy Military Barracks and their mother Mary was brought behind them in a horse and cart. Mary Kent was released about three hours later.



Figure 1- Thomas & William Kent

3. 1916

FERMOY TRAGEDY. THE WAR

HEAD-CONSTABLE ROWE SHOT OFFICIAL DESPATCHES.

FRENCH.

ATTACK AT "DEAD MAN." FOES' ENORMOUS LOSSES.

Our Fermoyn correspondent writes:—

Early this morning a party of Constabulary under command of Head-constable W. M. Rowe, Fermoyn, proceeded to the residence of Mrs. Mary Kent, Bawnard, Castlelyons, to demand the surrender of arms, and it is stated to arrest some of the members of the family who are alleged to be identified with the Sinn Fein movement. Shots were fired from the house, one taking fatal effect on Head-constable Rowe, whose brains were blown out, death being instantaneous. The Constabulary, finding how matters stood, sent for military assistance, which having arrived, the inmates surrendered and a number of arrests were made. Two of the Kents were seriously wounded—one it is stated fatally—and were conveyed to the military hospital. The sad affair has caused quite a sensation in the town and district. Head-constable Rowe leaves a widow and five children to mourn his loss, and the dearest sympathy is freely expressed with them for their terrible bereavement as also sincere regret. Head-constable Rowe being most popular with all sections in the town since his arrival, only a few months ago, in Fermoyn. The whole sad disturbances are deeply deplored by the people of Fermoyn, who have always lived in the greatest good feeling with one another and the authorities.

Paris, Monday.

The following communique was issued this afternoon:—

West of the Meuse, following up yesterday's violent bombardment, the enemy at the end of the day directed a powerful attack in close formation against the trenches won by us against the Mort Homme.

Our curtain and machine-gun fire inflicted enormous losses on the enemy, all of whose assaults were broken up.

North of Cumières two German counter-attacks carried out at about the same time against the trench which we captured yesterday, were similarly repulsed.

In the course of a third attack the enemy, who had secured a footing in our lines, was unable to maintain his hold, and was driven out immediately, with serious losses.

There has been a violent and continuous bombardment of Hill 304 and of the region of Vaux.

In the Woevre the night was calm.

Aviation.—On the night of April 29-30 our attacking squadrons dropped a number of projectiles on the revictualing and munitions depot of Sobastol (south of Thiaucourt), on the

Figure 2- The Cork Examiner, 3 May 1916

The following day, Thomas and William were taken from Fermoy to Cork city on the train, under military escort. From the train station (now named after Thomas Kent), they were marched to the Military Detention Barracks. Two days later, Richard died from his wounds at the Military Hospital.

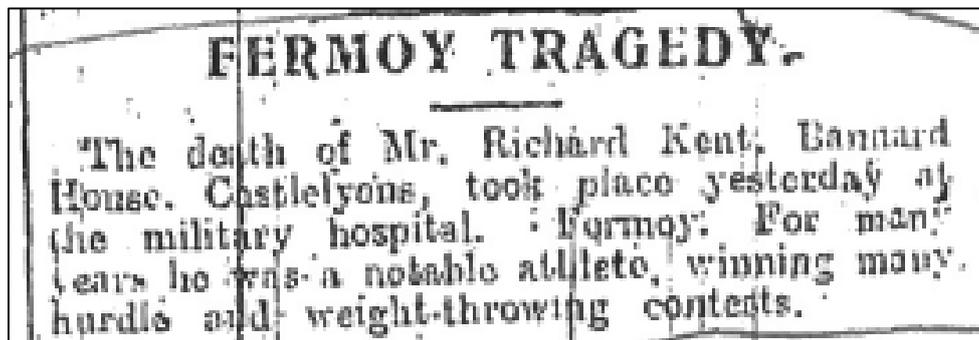


Figure 3- The Cork Examiner



Figure 4- Richard Kent

His remains were only given to his family on the condition that his funeral would leave the town as soon as possible and that the general public were not allowed to participate in the event. After coming down Barrack Hill in Fermoy, the procession was stopped by the military at a road block on Fermoy Bridge, but was allowed to continue after a short delay. The procession continued to Castlelyons, where Richard Kent was laid to rest in the cemetery at St. Nicholas' Church.

David Kent would almost certainly have been court-martialled immediately, and possibly shot, had it not been for the intervention of Dr. Brodie, of Kilworth, at the Military Hospital in Fermoy. Dr. Brodie kept him in the hospital and refused to certify him as being fit for removal to Cork.

On 4th May, the same day that Richard died, Thomas and William were court-martialled. They were charged under the terms of the Defence of the Realm Act with taking part in an armed rebellion and waging war against His Majesty the King. William was acquitted, but Thomas was charged. When the proceedings got underway for Thomas' sentencing, he found himself, not before a judge and jury, but rather before Major Jeffreys of the 3rd Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers, Captain Massey from the 3rd Battalion Royal Dublin Fusiliers and Captain Friend of the 3rd Battalion, the Leinster Regiment, as well as RIC Constables and British army officers who had been at Bawnard House on the night of the siege. Thomas Kent, unrepresented by legal counsel, was asked only nine questions in cross-examination. He offered only seventy-one words in a rebuttal statement and was not allowed to call on any witnesses. Thomas was found guilty and sentenced to death, despite the fact that there was no evidence provided to directly connect him to the death of Constable Rowe. The death warrant was signed by General Maxwell on 6th May. At 6am on the morning of 9th May 1916, Thomas Kent was taken out to the prison yard and shot by firing squad made up of British Navy members. He refused a blindfold and was shot holding rosary beads.

David Kent was moved to Richmond Barrack in Dublin to be court-martialled. He was also given a death sentence, but this was later commuted to penal servitude for life. He was sent to Britain, along with the other prisoners arrested in the aftermath of 1916. He remained here until all prisoners were released under amnesty in June 1917. Upon his release, he immediately returned to active service in what was now known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA). After the treaty, David was elected as a Sinn Féin TD for the Cork East constituency on three occasions but, as per Sinn Féin policy at the time, he refused to take his seat. He died peacefully in Bawnard House in 1930.

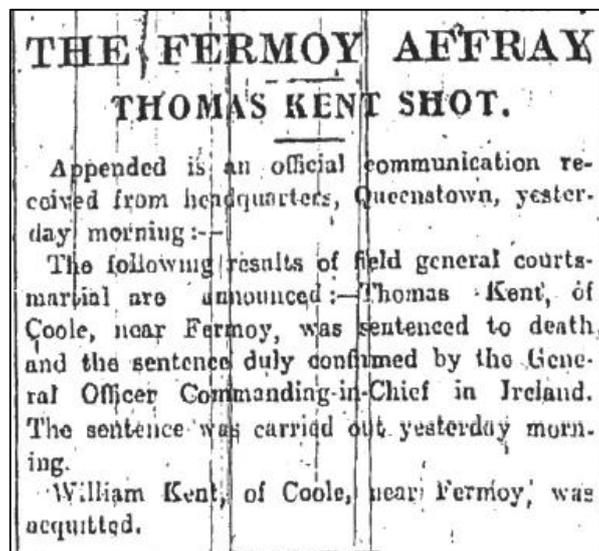


Figure 5- The Cork Examiner, 10 May, 1916

AY MORNING, MAY 10, 1916

FERMOY AFFRAY.

THOMAS KENT SHOT.

DUBLIN SITUATION.

NO FURTHER SENTENCES.

TROOPS' CASUALTIES TOTAL.

IRELAND & DISARMAMENT.

ARRESTS IN SOUTH.

CLEMENCY APPEALS.

It was officially announced yesterday morning that Thomas Kent, of Coole, near Fermoy, was sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out yesterday morning.

William Kent was acquitted.

In the House of Commons yesterday Mr. Asquith announced the troops' casualties to total 124 killed and 383 wounded.

The White Star liner Cymric was torpedoed west of the Fastnet.

She carried no passengers, but had a cargo. The Cymric sank about three o'clock yesterday morning. Five men were killed as a result of the explosion. The crew have been landed at Bantry.

Mr. Wesley Frost, the American Consul at Queenstown, has proceeded to Bantry with the object of inquiring as to whether any Americans were on board the liner, and under what circumstances the ship was torpedoed.

The German despatch of Monday claimed to have captured a whole network of trenches on the northern slopes of Hill 304, and their lines pushed forward up to the Hill itself.

Forty officers and 1,280 unwounded prisoners fell into their hands.

The French semi-official says that their valiant soldiers now regularly recapture on the morrow the slight, costly, and ephemeral gains made by the enemy the day before. Thanks to their untiring heroism, the situation on both banks of the Meuse is reestablished as it was before the last renewal of the formidable German offensive. Matters are, therefore, taking a good turn.

Figure 6- The Cork Examiner, 10 May 1916



Figure 7- Thomas Kent



Figure 8- David Kent