

THE NEW YORK CARMELITES
AND THE IRISH FREEDOM MOVEMENT

ALFRED ISACSSON, O.CARM.

When Sean T. O’Kelly was the president of the Republic of Ireland, he came to New York in 1959 to address the United Nations. Donal O’Callaghan, O. Carm., was the provincial of the Carmelite Province of Saint Elias (New York Province). He invited O’Kelly to dinner at the school hall of Our Lady of the Scapular Parish. At that dinner, O’Kelly said in his speech that the hall in which they were dining was the “Cradle of Irish independence.” We propose in this article to show the basis for this statement.

In Civics class in first year high school, William Travers, O. Carm. said to us “The principal historical error is to judge the events of the past in the light of the knowledge of the present day.” You must keep this adage in mind as you read this article. What was done in the past would probably not be done today.

The period we are writing about contains two wars: one of Ireland with England, the War of Independence, 1916-1921 and the Irish Civil War 1922-1923. The latter was between the supporters of the Irish Free State and their opponents who desired total separation from England.

The New York Carmelites were active in the Irish Freedom Movement composed of people and organizations whose goal was independence of Ireland from England under whose governance they were. The Carmelites in Ireland were no less devoted to their country than their New York brothers but because of the presence of English forces in Ireland could do little to militate against English rule. Their New York brothers more than made up for the silence in Ireland. The Rising in Dublin in 1916 against English rule was on Easter Monday and was crushed by a large numbers of English soldiers and the leaders of the revolt were executed. It would seem that the New York Carmelites had some indication of the impending revolt. They were acquainted with the men who had gathered arms for the uprising though they could not ship them all to Ireland. The Carmelites through these acquaintances had to have at least a general idea of a

forthcoming revolt. The Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) was a secret, oath bound organization. Its goal was an independent democratic republic in Ireland. Peter Elias Magennis, then an assistant general, was present at Our Lady of the Scapular for almost all of 1916. He was also a member of the IRB and had to know in advance of the Rising.¹ Through him, the other Carmelites would have been made aware of it.

When the Rising did occur on April 24, 1916, some Carmelites from Dublin's Whitefriars Street priory ministered the sacraments to those fighting for independence. Berthold Keating ministered to the militants in Jacob's biscuit factory. When he was transferred to New York, he gave talks and interviews describing his experiences.² Albert Metcalf was another Carmelite who ministered to the insurgents and he, too, was transferred to New York and spoke to groups of his experiences.³

Denis O'Connor went to Ireland for the 1916 provincial chapter. Before and after the chapter, he spent time on holidays in Ireland. He was shadowed by British troops because, as he said, the British feared anyone who lived in America. He had to report to the military in person his travels from place to place. O'Connor described Ireland as being in a state of military occupation. Some farm products were commandeered and there was strict censorship. O'Connor pledged that he would never visit Ireland again during the "war."⁴

The church and second priory of Our Lady of the Scapular Church, suppressed and now razed, were in New York City at 339 East 28th Street just in from First Avenue. The original priory was at 329 East 29th Street. This 29th Street address is the one remembered by those who found the priory open to them as a refuge and a center of support for their ideals.⁵ This latter is the structure and address we will be dealing with in this article. A few doors west from the original priory on East 29th Street was the parish school opened in 1904. The school had a large basement and on the first floor, a large auditorium with a stage. The facilities of the school were open by the pastor, Denis O'Connor (1916-1922) to all Irish organizations. The parish itself had

¹ ALFRED ISACSSON, *Always Faithful*, Middletown, 2004, 13-15.

² *Irish World*, June 20, 1916.

³ *Gaelic American*, Dec 9, 30, 1916.

⁴ *Irish World*, Sept 30, 1916.

⁵ This is the address Eamon De Valera used in conversation at Kennedy Airport with the author and Carmelites who met with him between his flight from Ireland and the one to Peru for the funeral of the Irish missionary, Canon Tom Duggan.

dances, concerts and lectures, all Irish in character and utilizing the school facilities. When the Friends of Irish Freedom (FOIF) were organized in 1916 to promote Irish independence, the Carmelites were tardy and did not have a Branch in their parish until 1917. Though started late, the Carmelite Branch grew to be the largest and most active of the New York Branches.

Meetings of the FOIF had lectures, musical concerts, plays and literary presentations. They drew large numbers to their events. "The Eve of Eviction," a dramatic display and lecture was presented on February 24, 1918.⁶ Gerard O'Farrell, stationed at Our Lady of the Scapular, gave a lecture on the Irish poet, James Mangan on March 24, 1918.⁷ At another meeting, Liam Mellows spoke on "The History of the Royal Irish Constabulary" and a play let "The Shadows of Political Life" was presented.⁸ When the newspaper of John Devoy, the *Gaelic American*, was banned from the United States mails by the Woodrow Wilson administration because of its anti British tone, the Carmelite Branch of the FOIF came to the journal's support. The Carmelites gave \$100 to the paper and Peter Elias Magennis, on his own, raise money it.⁹ The Carmelite branch regularly had *ceilidhs* - dances - to bring a taste of Irish music to their gatherings. The lectures and other items of the programs of the Carmelite Branch are well documented.¹⁰

The Irish Progressive League was a radical organization of younger Irish who were dissatisfied with organizations of older people being the voice striving for Irish freedom. They usually attended the 10:00 AM Mass at Our Lady of the Scapular and then met in the school hall. Peter Elias Magennis usually attended their meetings.¹¹ The Irish Progressive League scheduled a meeting for Madison Square Garden, then located at East 26th Street and Madison Avenue, for May 4, 1918 to protest the British conscription of Irish for World War I. The Garden seated 8,000 and it was half filled for the rally. Peter Elias Magennis gave an emotional talk viewing conscription from a mother's viewpoint. Unfortunately, he verbally attacked a Mrs William Jay who had tried to prevent the meeting.¹² She and others, who had tried to

⁶ *Irish World*, Feb 23, 1918.

⁷ *Irish World* and *Gaelic American*, Both Mar 23, 1918.

⁸ *Irish World*, July 31, 1918.

⁹ *Gaelic American*, July 20, 27, 1918.

¹⁰ A. ISACSSON, *Always*, 39-40. A. ISACSSON, *The Carmelites of New York and Their Involvement in the Irish Freedom Movement 1916-1921*, Maspeth, 1978.

¹¹ TERRY GOLWAY, *Irish Rebel*, (NY) 1998, 242.

¹² *Gaelic American* (NY) May 11, 1918.

prevent the rally, reported Magennis and his “unpatriotic and seditious” words to John Cardinal Farley, the Archbishop of New York.¹³ Farley replied to the protesters that Magennis would not be allowed to preside at such meetings in the future and if he did, he would not be allowed to remain in the Archdiocese of New York.¹⁴ There were further communications from both sides but perhaps the most significant one was from Peter Elias Magennis in the *New York Tribune*. The main point of his letter was that Ireland had a right to representative government and that was all that the Garden meeting was about.¹⁵ Irish organizations left no stone unturned in their support of Magennis. They even tried to involve the Apostolic Delegate to the United States.¹⁶

Edward Southwell, the pastor of Transfiguration Church in Tarrytown, NY and Magennis fellow Carmelite, wrote Cardinal Farley disagreeing with the action of Magennis and sent Farley the prior general’s name and address so he could report Magennis to him.¹⁷ Farley’s secretary, Thomas Carroll, replied cordially saying that Farley would not get in touch with John Lorenzoni, prior general. He felt that Magennis came to realize that he represented more than himself when he expressed his views on “such an inflammable subject as Irish politics.”¹⁸

Peter Elias Magennis was the national president of the FOIF at the time he was elected prior general of the order. There was a rift between Eamon De Valera and Daniel Cohalan over whether funds raised by the FOIF should be sent to Ireland or kept in the United States. When Magennis was elected general, Cohalan seized the opportunity to have his candidate appointed to the presidency thereby gaining control of the FOIF. To counteract this, Eamon De Valera began in 1920 the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic (AARIR).¹⁹ Because the Carmelites were totally

¹³ *New York Times*, May 21, 1918.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, May 22, 1918.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, May 23, 1918.

¹⁶ Vatican Archives, Apostolic Delegate, Washington, V 83/1 and 7809 E.

¹⁷ Southwell to Farley, Tarrytown, June 10, 1918, Archives Archdiocese of New York, I-29.

¹⁸ Carroll to Southwell, NY, June 29, 1918, copy, Archives Archdiocese of New York, I-29.

¹⁹ For De Valera’s side cf. DOROTHY MACARDLE, *The Irish Republic*, Dublin, 1951, 368-71, 410-11; the Cohalan position is in C. F. TANSILL, *America and the Fight for Irish Freedom* (NY), 1957, 392-94.

loyal to De Valera, they closed down their Branch of the FOIF and established the Carmelite Council in the AARIP. The activities of the previous one continued with the new organization. A new feature of the AARIP was the speaking of Denis O'Connor to twenty-two Councils in the year 1921.²⁰

The Carmelite staff of Our Lady of the Scapular in this period were all born in Ireland and were allowed about every three years a trip by boat to visit their families and friends in Ireland. When Donal O'Callaghan was a student of theology in Washington, DC, he began researching the Irish activities of the New York Carmelites. One of the things he did was to interview some of the older priests. He learned that some of the Carmelites traveling by boat carried on their person messages from Ireland for persons prominent in the Irish Freedom Movement in the United States. They dealt with anti-British activities. Peter Elias Magennis and Christopher Slattery carried messages from Ireland to men in the movement in New York. Hugh Devlin carried a message for Liam Mellows which he delivered to him personally.²¹

When Eamon De Valera came to the United States after his escape from Lincoln prison, he came from the boat directly to the Carmelite Priory on East 29th Street where he was secure. His school mate from Blackrock College, Lawrence Flanagan, was not at home when he arrived but came home later and De Valera saw his school mate for the first time in twenty years. De Valera came from the Carmelite Priory for his first public appearance in the United States at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel.²² Others availed themselves of the Carmelite hospitality in the priory which was for them a "safe house" and a place for receiving messages Harry Boland, Sean Nunan, Liam Pedlar and Liam Mellows also used the safety of the Carmelite Priory. All of these were arms dealers for the Irish cause.

The Carmelite Council of the AARIP raised money at their meetings.²³ Talks were given and pledges of money taken. Records in the province's archives show money came to the Carmelite Council from other Councils and individuals. The Carmelite records show that

²⁰ A. ISACSSON, *The Carmelites of New York and their Involvement in the Irish Freedom Movement, 1916-1924*, Maspeth, [1980], 54-55.

²¹ O'Callaghan Research, ANYP.

²² 160/263, 150/668 De Valera Papers, University College Dublin (UCD); McGarrity Papers, 17,608, National Library of Ireland, is another version.

²³ "Traces of Clandestine Operations in the Records of the New York Carmelites," *The Irish Sword* 102, Winter, 2007, 437-439.

over \$75,000 was raised. The records in the papers of Eamon De Valera lists \$36, 586 coming to the Refugee Fund and other such titles which were covers for money to be used for the purchase of arms.²⁴ This money raising originally was in the fight against the British but once independence was gained and the Free State was established, the Carmelite money was devoted to the Republicans, the followers of Eamon De Valera and against the Free State.

The American Counsel in Dublin on June 9, 1921 wrote his State Department superiors that without American money the IRA (those fighting against England) would have to quit in three months without American money.²⁵ He listed the funds "The Prisoners' Dependent Fund" and "The Refugee Fund" and stated they were simply conduits for Sinn Fein, the rebels. The counsel then listed all the people that were involved in funneling money to Ireland. A good number of those people were associated with the New York Carmelites.²⁶ De Valera kept a careful record of money going back and forth to Ireland. Names he mentioned were Jim McGee, Harry Boland Father Timothy Shanley and Joseph McGarrity.²⁷

The generosity of the Carmelite Council in raising funds was so well known that De Valera "on the run" and in the midst of the Civil War wrote to Denis O'Connor, the Carmelite pastor. He appealed to his friend to send money as the lack of it was hindering their efforts.²⁸

Sean Reid, O. Carm., pastor of Our Lady of the Scapular 1943-1964, came from a staunch Republican household in Killkenny and studied in Rome (1927-1933) during the time of the generalship of Peter Elias Magennis. Only when he was ordained and returned to New York did he learn of Carmelite involvement in the arms business and the use of the priory and church basements as an arsenal.

Jim McGee and his family lived in Saint Gabriel's Parish just north of the territory of the Carmelite Parish of Our Lady of the Scapular. There was a gunsmith who had a shop on the street in which McGee lived. At the shop, McGee purchased guns for shipment to Ireland. These and others he collected or were given him, he would arrange through his work as a longshoreman and his acquaintance

²⁴ Irish Fund Raising, ANYP; 150/1030 De Valera Papers, UCD.

²⁵ Consul Report, Dublin, June 9, 1921, 12, #752, Roll 218, Record Group M 580, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

²⁶ Consul Report, Dublin, Aug 9, 1921, #986, #1068, #1071 in *Ibid.*

²⁷ 150/1309, De Valera Papers, UCD.

²⁸ De Valera to O'Connor, [Dublin], 150/1280. De Valera Papers, UCD.

with ship crews he would ship these guns to Ireland. McGee and his associates were closely connected with the Carmelites and his son, Patrick Eamon De Valers McGee, was baptized by Lawrence, Flanagan, O. Carm., in the Carmelite church.

The storage of the arms and ammunition gathered for shipment to Ireland was a problem. As Edmund O'Brien, one of the arms gatherers, wrote: "later [mid summer of 1920] a safer and commodious store for such goods [arms and ammunition] was found in the Carmelite Priory which was, if I remember correctly, on 29th Street, on the East Side. The Carmelite priests were favorably disposed towards the Irish cause and gave their help in every way. In this case, it provided us with a place within their grounds to use as a dump for arms and ammunition, which relieved us of a lot on anxiety regarding the safety of such stuff."²⁹

There was the purchase of 500 Thompson submachine guns by the Irish arms merchants. Due to the large number and the size of the guns, only some were stored in the basements of the Carmelite church and priory. There they were sewn into burlap sacks for shipment. Harry Boland and Jim McGee chartered a ship, the *East Side*, for shipping the guns to Ireland. As the gun transporters were leaving the priory with the guns, Peter Elias Magennis met them and wished them luck. The guns were transported to Hoboken, NJ where the *East Side* was docked. Because there was a longshoreman's demonstration against British ships docked in Hoboken, Jim McGee and his helpers failed to move the Thompsons into the hold and left them on deck. The presence of the guns was reported to the police who seized them. Attempts by those running the Thompson operation failed to repossess the guns and they remained in the custody of the federal government.³⁰ Some people involved were arrested but on the completion of a long legal process, no one was prosecuted.³¹ The Carmelite involvement was never made public.

In May, 1922, just before the start of the Irish Civil War, Liam Pedlar wrote from New York to Harry Boland in Ireland concerning what Pedlar called the "45 proposition." Pedlar cited the original order as being for 700,000 rounds of .45 ammunition. A down payment of

²⁹ Brannigan-Isacsson Correspondence; Reid to Brannigan, Middletown, May 10, 1992, copy, Archives New York Province (ANYP).

³⁰ A. ISACSSON, *Always*, 96-100.

³¹ A. ISACSSON, "Indictments in the *East Side* Thompson Seizure," *The Irish Sword* 28 (Winter, 2003) 446-447.

\$15,000 had been made and a balance of \$13,000 remained. Pedlar wanted Boland to authorize the Carmelite, Denis O'Connor, to give Pedlar the balance to complete the deal. O'Connor was estimated to have \$18,000 to \$20,000 on hand for this purpose. The deal for the 45 ammunition seems never to have been completed.³²

We would never do today what the Carmelites of those days did but we are not in their time or place. We must not judge events of the past in the light of the knowledge of today. They did nothing illegal as the shipping of arms to Ireland was not against the law and they were exercising their American rights of free assembly and speech. Living in the United States these Carmelites lived where self determination was expressed in the American Revolution. The spirit of self determination was rampant in that World War I era as a goal of the peace conference. The Irish in the United States felt this especially and desired their native land to have the freedoms they were practicing in their adopted country. The self determination of Ireland was never brought to the table at Versailles. This was a factor that defeated the entry of the United States into the League of Nations.

Alfred Isacsson, O.Carm.
Our Lady of Mount Carmel
90 Euclid Ave. PO Box 883
Middletown, NY - U.S.A.

³² A. ISACSSON, *Always* 103-104; Pedlar to Boland, NY, May 24, 1922, copy from Brian Murphy, OSB.