

The Secret Meeting that Agreed the Date for the Easter Rising

by Dr Conor O'Malley

The Monaghan playwright, Eugene McCabe wrote *Pull Down a Horseman* to coincide with the 50th Anniversary of the Rising in 1966. The play depicts a purported secret meeting between Patrick Pearse and James Connolly held over three days from Wednesday, 19 January 1916. The outcome is that Connolly commits the Irish Citizen Army to join with the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and the date for the Rising is agreed. This article looks at the evidence for the meeting, how did it come about, who was at it, what transpired at it. By interrogating evidence from those who had some direct involvement with or knowledge of the settling of the date for the Rising, using the scholarship of historians, and cross referencing with testimony lodged at the Bureau of Military History, it is possible to piece together much of the story, in the process separating out some myth from actuality.

From the early 1920s onwards, there have been questions as to whether Connolly had been 'invited' or 'kidnapped' to attend a meeting with senior IRB leadership in January 1916. The broad outline appears to be as follows. In early January 1916, and in high anxiety that Dublin Castle would imminently arrest the leadership of those plotting a rebellion, Connolly thought it essential to pre-empt this by triggering the rebellion himself with his own 200 strong Citizen Army. He hoped that this action would embolden the IRB, the Volunteers, and the wider separatist movement to fall in with his initiative. In mid-January, Eoin MacNeill and Pearse met with Connolly and became alarmed at his zeal to act unilaterally and within days. As they saw it, drastic action was needed to forestall Connolly. Pearse undertook to talk to Connolly to try and persuade him to desist and some days later Pearse reassuringly reported to MacNeill that he had succeeded in stopping Connolly from acting precipitously; Pearse did not explain fully to MacNeill how this persuasion had been achieved. A story gradually emerged that Connolly was effectively 'kidnapped' by the IRB on Wednesday, 19 January 1916 and held for three days in a house of an IRB member in Dolphin's Barn and during that time persuaded by key members (including Pearse, Clarke, Ceannt and Mac Diarmada) of the IRB's military council (constituting a 'sub-committee' of the I.R.B. Supreme Council) to

fall in with their plans for the triggering of the rebellion at Easter that year. The participants were sworn to secrecy, but some important information has been gleaned, significantly from Joseph Plunkett as related contemporaneously to his sister Geraldine.¹ The outcome is signalled in the *Workers' Republic*² newspaper of January 29th, in an editorial penned by Connolly himself and which hints 'the seed is planted' and he challenges the reader 'Are you ready?'

Summarising and synopsising the events surrounding the meeting, the historian F.X. Martin wrote in 1961:

'In the light of what we know about the agreement eventually reached between Connolly and the IRB military council, the facts related by MacNeill suggest the following dates and sequences of events. The interview with Connolly took place about 16 January when he was still threatening independent armed action by the Irish Citizen Army, and alarming not only MacNeill but the military council of the IRB. Connolly's adamant attitude during the interview with MacNeill convinced Pearse that the Citizen Army was determined on revolt in the near future. Pearse informed the other members of the IRB council, and they arranged a meeting with Connolly in a house at Dolphin's Barn on 19 January, where he stayed three days. During this time they persuaded him to fall in with their plans for a revolt late in April. (O'Shannon, *Fifty Years of Liberty Hall*, pp. 66-67). He re-appeared on 22 January, without explanation then or subsequently to his wife and friends about his absence. Very shortly after 22 January Pearse was able to reassure MacNeill "that he had succeeded with Connolly".³

But had Connolly really been *kidnapped* to bring the meeting about? That Connolly disappeared for three days without forewarning his colleagues or his family is established. Evidence provided by way of the IRB member on Connolly's staff, trade

¹ Joseph Plunkett gave an account of what happened at the meeting to his sister Geraldine Plunkett and the story is set out in *All in the Blood*, a family memoir of the Easter Rising and the War of Independence" by Geraldine Plunkett Dillon, edited by Honor O Brolchain, published by A & A Farmer, 2012.

² *Workers' Republic* Dublin, Saturday, January 29, 1916. Volume 1, Number 36, page 1. The newspaper was printed in Liberty Hall under the direction of Christopher Brady.

³ Extract from *Eoin MacNeill on the 1916 Rising, Irish Historical Studies, Vol. xii, 47 (March, 1961) p. 253*. Le Roux (Life of Patrick H. Pearse, Phoenix publishing, 1932, p. 329), misquotes MacNeill as follows, 'Pearsé remained after Connolly's departure, and according to MacNeill, admitted that "Connolly was a little too unreasonable, but that he, Pearse, might persuade Connolly".' Le Roux may have believed that MacNeill's statement if published accurately would cast doubts on Pearse's veracity; in fact, it can be argued that Pearse in the declaration recorded by MacNeill meant that he disagreed with Connolly's project for an immediate insurrection. Early in January 1916 the military council of the I.R.B., which included Pearse, had selected the approaching Easter as the time for the revolt (Lynch I.R.B. pp. 30, 75,100, 135). Significantly, Le Roux does not quote or refer to this sentence, but Pearse's statement may be interpreted as containing the mental reservation that he had succeeded in persuading Connolly to delay his insurrection and join in with the Volunteers on Easter Sunday.

unionist and journalist, Cathal O'Shannon, is critical to addressing the question.⁴ O'Shannon's research findings were published in a book published in 1959 to commemorate the golden jubilee of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, *Fifty Years of Liberty Hall*. It provides a detailed account of the January 1916 meeting:

'Final, and as events showed momentous, agreement was made between Connolly and members of the Military Committee of the I.R.B. in the third week in January, 1916. This was at a meeting held at a house in Dolphin's Barn occupied by a member of the I.R.B., John Cassidy, manager of the local brickworks.

Connolly went from Liberty Hall to this meeting in a car provided by a prominent member of the I.R.B. and accompanied by an escort of two Volunteers, Frank Daly and Eamon Dore, detailed for this duty, by Edward Daly, commanding the First Battalion of which they were members. He was absent from Liberty Hall for three days and as he had informed none of his colleagues in the Union or in the Citizen Army of his departure or of the purpose for which he had gone, his disappearance caused great anxiety in both organisations. For a time Countess Markievicz, one of its officers, was so agitated that she proposed that she and Mallin should then and there lead the Citizen Army into insurrection but was finally dissuaded from this course by William O'Brien, supported by Mallin.⁵ Connolly returned late on Saturday night, January 22, to his lodgings at Surrey House, Leinster Road but declined to account for his absence or movements even to his closest friends.

Over the years a legend has grown up, and been circulated since 1922 in newspaper articles and books, that Connolly's unexplained disappearance was due to what has been described as "kidnapping" and "forcible detention" by the I.R.B. until he should come to terms agreeable to that organisation, and many wild guesses as to the location of this alleged "custody under duress" have been published. The facts as stated here now are that Connolly's meeting with members of the Military Council was neither kidnapping nor forcible detention but a voluntarily prearranged conference and that it was held at Dolphin's Barn. These facts have within the past two years been definitely and finally established beyond all uncertainty by the personal testimony of the only two men now alive who called at Liberty Hall for Connolly and accompanied him to Dolphin's Barn, the two volunteers who escorted him on behalf of the Military Committee.

⁴ O'Shannon had been a member of IRB and on Connolly's staff based in Belfast and to whom Connolly gave some hint of the content of the meeting. O'Shannon had mobilised with the IRB them in Coalisland, Co. Tyrone on Easter Saturday 1916, with 100 hundred Volunteers (but failing definite orders from Dublin they dispersed). O'Shannon was arrested and interned at Frongoch, Wales. During the Civil War he took a leading part in mediating between Republican and Free State sides. Afterwards, he continued to work as a trade union official, and in 1941 became secretary of the Irish Trade Union Congress, and then to the Congress of Irish Unions.

⁵ A graphic account of the consequences arising from the sudden disappearance of Connolly on the rest of the Irish Citizen Army leadership is set out in *Forth the Banners Go*, reminiscences of William O'Brien, as told to Edward McLysaght, published by Three Candles, 1969.

In Belfast a week later, in reply to an enquiry by O'Shannon, Connolly said that the date for the insurrection had been fixed, that it wasn't as soon as he would have liked, but that it was definite and it would do. He added that five others and he were sworn to secrecy on the date until the time came to disclose it and that he had been assured – presumably by the members of the Military Committee with whom he had come to agreement – that MacNeill would not be in a position to interfere with the plans made for insurrection.

Shortly afterwards he repeated to J.J. Burke, a Volunteer who contributed articles to *The Worker's Republic*, what he had told O'Shannon about the date.

After this agreement Connolly discontinued his pointed criticism of Volunteer leaders and next week in *The Workers' Republic* of January 29 signified his acceptance of the arrangements for insurrection as explained to him at the conference at Dolphin's Barn:

“Our notes this week will be short. The issue is clear and we have done our part to clear it. Nothing we can now say can add point to the arguments we have put before our readers in the past few months; not shall we continue to labour the point.

In solemn acceptance of our duty and the great responsibilities attached thereto, we have planted the seed in the hope and belief there are many of us are much older it will ripen and blossom into action.

For the moment and hour of that ripening, that fruitful and blessed Day of Days, we are ready.

Will it find you ready?”

Subsequent events were to show that the five others sworn to secrecy on the date along with Connolly were Clarke, Pearse, McDermott, Plunkett and Ceannt, the members of the I.R.B's Military Committee. Formally joining the I.R.B. Connolly was co-opted a member of the Military Committee and appointed Commandant General of the Dublin Division of the Army of the Irish Republic. The co-option of Thomas MacDonagh at some later date brought the number of the Military Committee to the seven who on Easter Sunday became signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic and constituted the Provisional Government.'

Supporting evidence for the meeting outcome is provided via the reminiscences of the revolutionary and writer Piaras Béaslaí, who, shortly after this meeting - acted as an agent for the transmission to the IRB in England of secret information confirming the date for the Rising. Béaslaí was a member of the IRB and fought in the Rising. He was Vice Commandant of First Battalion, Dublin to Edward 'Ned' Daly, who features so prominently in O'Shannon's account of the meeting between Connolly and the IRB military council. This first hand testimony was published in the *Irish Independent* under

the heading 'A veteran remembers – a Nation in Revolt' in late May 1957. Béaslaí largely corroborates O'Shannon's account as follows:

'What actually happened?

I have learned that in January, 1916 three men went to Liberty Hall and conveyed Connolly to a conference with members of the IRB military council. One of these was the late Ned Daly, brother in law of Tom Clarke who as commander of the First Battalion, received instructions from the council and usually communicated them to me. He was executed in 1916 but the other two men are still living. One of them is Frank Daly at the time an officer of the First Battalion who took a prominent part in the 1916 Rising and the subsequent fight with the British in 1910 to 1921. The other one was Eamon T. Dore of Limerick who also played a big part in the struggle for freedom. He was at the time a young medical student in Dublin and did much confidential work for Sean MacDiarmada including the bearing of dispatches to Belfast and the West.

I have received an account of the affair from both these gentlemen. I have summarised the essential facts.

There was "no decoying" into a taxi, no kidnapping, no show of force, no detention

They got a motor from Thompson's garage in Pearse Street, the manager and the driver being in their confidence, and drove to Beresford Place. They walked into Liberty Hall, gave their message requesting Connolly's attendance at a conference with Pearse and others and he cheerfully and smilingly consented to go with them. There was no question of producing weapons or even carrying them.

Frank Daly states that they drove to Dolphin's Barn, the house of John Cassidy, the manager of the local brickworks, a man who had been often helpful to them. Connolly walked into the room where the other leaders were. My informant did not know who was there besides Pearse, but he thinks that MacDonagh was one of the others. Frank Daly waited a long time till he was told he could go. As far as he knows, there was nothing to prevent Connolly returning to Liberty Hall after the conference. If he did not go, he must have remained of his own free will.'⁶

F.X. Martin finds the evidence of O'Shannon and Béaslaí compelling. He concluded:

'The facts and conjectures about the 'kidnapping' of Connolly as given in Ryan, *Rising* (pp47-63, 268) and Lynch *I.R.B.* (pp.122-130) need to be thoroughly revised in the light of the information published by O'Shannon in *Fifty Years* (pp.66-67) and by Piaras Béaslaí in *Irish Independent* 29-31 May, 1957. Late in January 1916 Connolly told C OS that a definite date had been fixed for the rebellion, and that he had been assured, presumably by members of the military

⁶ Extract from 'The disappearance of James Connolly A mystery solved?' A veteran remembers" Piaras Béaslaí, *Irish Independent*, 31 May 1957.

council, that MacNeill would not be in a position to interfere with the plans (p.67).'⁷

But what of the popularised testimonies cited above, chiefly those of Desmond Ryan and Diarmuid Lynch, who also have some claim to the ownership of important knowledge of the meeting and how it had come about. Can their assumption of kidnapping be entirely dismissed? After all, Desmond Ryan had been educated at St. Enda's and acted as Secretary to Pearse before 1916. He fought at the GPO and was interned. The kidnapping version of the meeting is described in his book *The Rising: The Complete Story of Easter Week* (1949). Diarmuid Lynch too had written *The I.R.B. and the 1916 Insurrection*, published in 1957. Lynch had acted as *aide de camp* to James Connolly and had later contributed (by way of collecting witness statements) to the work of the Bureau of Military History; there is also P.S. O'Hegarty, who, writing in *The Victory of Sinn Féin*, first published in 1924 and also wholly accepting of the 'kidnap' theory. Could all of them have been mistaken?

Scholarly interrogation of the veracity of the main sources available on this point has not moved on significantly since the early 1960s. However, the recent publication online of Eamon T. Dore's witness testimony, dated 30th June, 1950 to the Bureau of Military History throws up a contradiction between some of the Béaslaí and O'Shannon's account of what was told to them by both Frank Daly and Eamon T. Dore. Dore was one of the IRB officers detailed to accompany Connolly to the meeting.⁸ It will be recalled that both O'Shannon and Béaslaí rely on these individuals as providing conclusive evidence of the voluntary nature of the meeting. Dore states:

'I remember the occasion of supposed arrest of James Connolly in the early Spring of 1916. The action in this case was taken by the decision of the I.R.B. I knew from my connection with Sean McDermott and Tom Clarke that Connolly had been causing trouble, affecting a contempt of the I.R.B. and the Volunteers, or disbelieving the earnestness of intentions in these organisations.

I was told by Sean McDermott to meet Ned Daly on this date at Seamus O'Connor's office in Dame St. and I did so, understanding from him at the time

⁷ Selected Documents, 'Eoin MacNeill on the 1916 Rising', *Irish Historical Studies*, xii, 47 (March, 1961) footnote 6, p.253

⁸ Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Statement by Witness Eamon T. Dore, document number W.S. 392 Subject National Events 1915-1920 File no. S.10141

that it was for some special action in connection with Connolly. Frank Daly (brother of Paddy Daly) was also detailed and was present when I met Ned Daly in the office in Dame St. about 12 noon. We there waited there for about an hour and a half when Ned Daly then decided to go out to find out how things stood, while Frank Daly and I remained. Ned Daly came back after about twenty minutes or half an hour, and told us that everything was all right now, and that we could go home.

From what I learned at the time and immediately afterwards about this matter, I gathered that it was Sean McDermott who took action on behalf of the Supreme Council, and probably in consultation to have a showdown with Connolly. Connolly was to be invited or persuaded to accompany him to a house in the vicinity of Castleknock. I believe Murt O'Connell brought a dispatch there at the time, so he should know the house.

It was intended that if Connolly refused to go voluntarily he was to be arrested and brought there under guard, and it was for this reason that Ned and Frank Daly and I stood by in O'Connor's office. Apparently Connolly did agree to go with McDermott and so our services were not required in the matter. I should like to point out that this whole business was an I.R.B. matter and that the two Dalys and myself were there as I.R.B. officers rather than Volunteers.'

Dore's witness statement varies significantly from that of Frank Daly as reported by Béaslaí. From Dore's account there is no direct interaction by them with Connolly, no actual accompanying by them of him to any meeting, nor agreement as to the location of the meeting. Dore asserts that the person who makes the actual contact with Connolly is MacDiarmada.

On balance, it would seem that the direct words of the witness in sworn statement provided by one of the two individuals to the Bureau of Military History some seven years before the interviews with O'Shannon and Béaslaí, should be held the more convincing of the two accounts.⁹

Connolly had not been kidnapped. Nonetheless, contingency arrangements had been made to do so at the moment of confrontation, if necessary. To varying extents all the participants and witnesses writing about the subject of the meeting held some of the

⁹ From Geraldine Dillon's account, and quoted in *Forth the Banners Go*, Dillon relates "that some of them had waited outside Liberty Hall in a hired car driven by a volunteer." The "others" are stated as including MacDiarmada and Ceannt. Accepting that the IRB driver was neither Eamon Dore nor Frank Daly, then the identity of the IRB driver is not known.

A broadly corroborative account is set out in Chapter Five, 'Preparations for Insurrection' in *James Connolly: a full life* by Donal Nevin published by Gill and Macmillan, 2005

evidence. Within this frame, the playwright Eugene McCabe's artistic response, in *Pull Down a Horseman*, to the effect that the 'three day session, must have been tense, stormy, and mentally exhausting – especially exhausting for Connolly who was one against many' comes across as a valid interpretation.¹⁰

Dr Conor O'Malley is director of the Dublin Lyric Player's production of *Pull Down a Horseman* by Eugene McCabe, which is based on the secret meeting of James Connolly and Patrick Pearse.

¹⁰ From the author's Introduction to *Pull Down a Horseman/Gale Day* by Eugene McCabe, published by Gallery Press, 1979.