



MICHAEL STAINES

THE REBEL

COMMISSIONER

The role played by Ireland's first Garda Commissioner, Michael Staines, in the Irish Volunteers from their foundation until the 1916 Easter Rising is analysed here by Joe Ward. He outlines the part Staines played as Quartermaster-General in the GPO during Easter Week, and details his detention in Frongach Camp in Wales in the aftermath of The Rising.

It is ironic that many of those who lit the flame during Easter Week went on to play prominent leadership roles in the early years of the fledgling state. One of these pioneers, Michael Staines, was primarily responsible for putting in place structures for a new police force and served a short period as Ireland's first Garda Commissioner.

The Easter Rising of 1916 was one of the major events of 20th century Irish History. It reintroduced the idea of a military solution to the Irish question after half a century, when non-violent avenues were being explored, such as John Redmond's Home Rule Act and Arthur Griffith's proposal for a Dual Monarchy.

Irish public opinion, which was initially hostile to the Rebellion, changed in response to the leaders' execution to one of public sympathy on account of their sacrifice. The years of turbulence that followed led to the establishment of the Irish Free State.

It is ironic that many of those who lit the flame during Easter Week went on to play prominent leadership roles in the early years of the fledgling state.

One of these pioneers was Michael Staines, who was primarily responsible for putting in place structures for a new police force and served a short tenure as first Garda Commissioner from March to September, 1922, a period dominated by events surrounding the Kildare Mutiny.

Michael Joseph Staines was born in Dublin in 1885 and brought up in Newport, Co. Mayo, before returning to Dublin at the age of 17. He soon became involved in the Celtic Revival and was treasurer of the Colmcille Branch of the Gaelic League who used to meet in a hall at Blackhall Street.

On 23 November, 1913, Staines attended the inaugural meeting of the Irish Volunteers in the Rotunda Hospital and became a member that same night. He played an active role in the drilling and training of Volunteers over the next year.

Towards the end of 1915 he was selected as the First Representative of the Dublin Brigade on the General Council of Irish Volunteers, which also included Pdraig Pearse, Eamon Ceannt and Sean Mac Diarmada.

At this time he was employed by Henshaws of Christchurch Place, who were General Merchants and Gunsmiths, and through them and contacts with other gunsmiths he was in a good position to purchase firearms and ammunition.



Michael Staines served a short period as Ireland's first Garda Commissioner (March-September, 1922).



QUARTERMASTER GENERAL

In March, 1916, Staines gave up his job with Henshaws and took up a full-time post as Quartermaster General with the Volunteers, replacing The O'Rahilly who had resigned his position in protest against the plans being put in place for a rebellion.

The responsibilities assigned to Staines in his new position included the purchase and distribution of firearms, munitions and other implements, such as picks and crowbars, to the various Dublin Battalions and to certain country units, such as Cork and Galway.

Staines rapid rise to QMG has been attributed to his ability to secure munitions relatively easily through his contacts in Henshaws, while his brother Humphrey, a seaman, was able to smuggle weapons into Glasgow Port from America. These were subsequently smuggled into Ireland through a network organised in Britain by the Irish Republican Brotherhood. The failure to land arms on

Good Friday and the last minute cancellation by Eoin McNeill of the Rising planned for Easter Sunday left many Volunteers uncertain as to the future plan of action.

Sometime after midnight on Easter Sunday night Staines was summoned to Fredrick Street where he met Padraig Pearse and Mac Diarmada who informed him that the Rising was going ahead at noon.

As the representative of the Dublin Brigade they wanted his consent for that plan of action. Staines consented to this request with considerable reservations, as he was concerned about committing men to an armed conflict, which he thought had little hope of success. However, his agreement cleared the way for a rebellion in Dublin.

THE EASTER RISING

Michael Staines reported to Liberty Hall on the morning of Easter Monday 24 April, where he was met by James Connolly. He spent the morning loading ammunition into a cab and a motor car owned by The O'Rahilly. (He took part in the Rising despite his opposition to it and died in Moore



On Easter Monday 24 April 1916 Michael Staines played a prominent part in the taking of the GPO.



The Easter Rising of 1916 is celebrated as one of the major events of 20th century Irish History.



Street later that week leading an advance party retreating from the General Post Office).

Just before midday, as Padraig Pearse led the battalion of rebels on the short journey from Liberty Hall to the GPO, bringing up the rear was Michael Staines seated on a cab filled with homemade bombs and ammunition.

Going up Abbey Street the horse pulling the cab stumbled, which if it fell could have triggered an explosion which would have wiped out the entire group. Staines played a prominent part in the taking of the GPO, and as soon as the rebels had established their position inside, he got a group of men to unload all the ammunition into the Sorting Room at the back of the main office.

He led a group of men to clear the top floor which was occupied with staff, when they were confronted by a group of six soldiers who, having been hastily overcome by the rebels, volunteered to remain in situ where they were put in charge of the canteen.

Shortly after the occupation Staines went on to the roof where he hoisted the tricolour flag on the Henry Street corner of the building. He recalled that from his lofty position, he saw Pearse down below reading the Proclamation to a crowd in front of the building. Staines also hung the green flag with the harp from the ceiling in the ground floor office.

Staines was in the GPO all through Easter Week, where he was busily engaged in ensuring that essential supplies were commandeered from suppliers in the Henry Street area. On Tuesday he sent dispatches to all O/Cs throughout the city to enquire if food or ammunition was required but all had sufficient supplies. A party of men were detailed by Staines to make ammunition at the back of the Sorting Office which they did for the remainder of the week.

UNDER CONTINUOUS FIRE

Early on Thursday the fighting became more intense as reinforcements of British soldiers arrived and kept the GPO under continuous fire from three sides, which kept Staines busy replenishing ammunition for the rebel defenders.

At noon the enemy began to shell the post office from the gunboat 'Helga', which caused many of the buildings in Sackville Street to catch fire. Staines recalled: *"The heat from the burning*



The first Garda Recruits to join parade for inspection on 22 February 1922. (Source: www.generalmichaelcollins.com)

buildings opposite was so great that men had to be employed to keep the window fortifications drenched with water to prevent the sandbags and sacks from going on fire."

On Thursday afternoon Staines found Connolly seriously injured in nearby Williams Lane and, with some help, he carried him back into the GPO, where he insisted on being carried out front where he could be with his men.

On Friday afternoon British guns

began to pour incendiary shells into the GPO and, despite gallant efforts by the rebels to quench the fires, the building was soon fully alight. Staines was one of the last men to leave the GPO when the evacuation of the building was ordered.

Having safely secured the ammunition in the Courtyard, he helped the Pearse Brothers and others to carry James Connolly through the broken walls in houses on Henry Street to the safety of Moore Street.



Gardaí parade for inspection circa. June 1922. (Source: www.generalmichaelcollins.com)



This was made their Headquarters and Staines placed the green flag with the harp over the bed where they had placed Connolly. On Saturday morning Staines went to the Headquarters where the leaders were gathered, as rumours of a surrender were rife. That afternoon, in order to prevent further loss of life, Pearse submitted an unconditional surrender to Brigadier General Lowe. The Easter Rising was over.

AFTERMATH OF THE RISING

After the surrender Sean MacDiarmada ordered Michael Staines to make arrangements to have James Connolly brought from Moore Street to Dublin Castle on a stretcher. Before leaving their HQ MacDiarmada took Staines' Sam Brown belt from him, which left him wearing the uniform of a private, saying "You'll be better off without this, you'll be wanted later on".

The stretcher bearers took Connolly out into Moore Street led by Willie Pearse carrying a white flag. At the end of Moore Street they surrendered to British officers who took them first to the Army HQ at the Parnell Monument and then to Dublin Castle.

Staines recalled that all along the way down through Great Britain Street and Capel Street the rebel prisoners were booed and jeered at by the crowd and would have been attacked only for the protection they received from British soldiers.

Upon reaching their destination Connolly was taken inside Dublin Castle while the rest of the prisoners were taken to Ship Street Barracks where statements were taken from them during the course of the day.

Next day (Sunday) the prisoners were transferred to Kilmainham Jail where they were incarcerated three to a cell. On Wednesday 3 May, the day of the first executions, while exercising in the prison yard Staines managed to talk to Joseph Plunkett who was also exercising.

During the course of the conversation Plunkett remarked to him that Easter Week was "a glorious week" and he was glad that they had made their protest. Plunkett was married later that night to Grace Gifford and executed the following morning.

DEPORTED TO ENGLAND

Michael Staines was brought to Richmond



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Barracks, Inchicore, on the Saturday of that week and the following day he was deported to Wakefield Prison in England, where he was detained under the Defence of the Realm Act, 1914, an emergency power enacted to coincide with the Great War.

He spent three weeks confined in Wakefield before being transferred to the Frongoch Prisoner of War Camp in Wales, originally intended for German Soldiers, who were evacuated to accommodate Irish Rebels.

There was about 1,500 men there initially but this was reduced to 600 during the summer following a British Home Office Review. Staines was elected Commandant of the Camp by the prisoners when the previous Commandant, JJ O'Connell, was moved to Reading Jail.

One of the prisoners, William Brennan-Whitmore, described Staines as "a highly efficient officer who earned the love and respect of every individual prisoner".

The conscription of Irish prisoners into the British Army was being actively considered by the UK Government. But the prisoners were concerned that the acceptance of conscription for prisoners might be a prelude to its introduction into Ireland.

PRISON RELEASE

It was an achievement that Staines was able to persuade the prison authorities to hold off on introducing conscription for

Irish internees. Brennan-Whitmore was of the view that Staines handled this very difficult position with remarkable efficiency and tact.

All of the prisoners in Frongoch were released in the Home Office Amnesty of 21 December, 1916, and Staines arrived back in Dublin, a free man on Christmas Eve.

Michael Staines continued to play an active role in Irish public life for another 20 years as a Sinn Fein activist, a Member of Dáil Eireann for St Michan's Constituency, Dublin and a member of the Free State Seanad Eireann. He died on 27 October, 1955, and is buried in Clontarf Cemetery.

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