

The Battle Not Remembered

Philip Harker

Waterford

April 24th, 1996

If there was one thing in this world that Martin detested, it was war. But if there was one thing in this world that Martin detested more than war, it was public speaking.

Martin found himself staring into space while waiting backstage when a sudden burst of applause rang out. “Thank you, thank you,” boomed the PA speaker as the cheering crowd’s roar began to quiet. “Without further ado, I would like to introduce our keynote speaker for today’s events. Please give a warm welcome to a Waterford native, and decorated war hero: Martin McMahon!”

Martin stood up from his seat in the wings of the temporary wooden stage. Squinting through the unusually bright April sunlight, he walked over to the podium slowly, cane in hand. The crowd cheered for him as he approached, waving flags, paint covering their faces.

Even with his cane, Martin could seldom stay standing for more than fifteen minutes or so at a time these days. The pain in his calf was just too much. But after days of practicing with Catherine, he figured his speech would only take him ten minutes at most.

He gazed out into the crowd that was filling up Parade Quay. There were more people here than Catherine had guessed. Martin began to feel uneasy looking at their faces. Most of them were young, in their twenties and thirties. Many of them had brought their kids. They wore

hats: green slouch hats, with patches on the front. Some of them wore full olive drab outfits, replica uniforms of the volunteers.

The speech Martin had prepared was one of peace; a condemnation of the old world, and a call to unify the country in search of a peaceful solution. But Martin could tell these young people weren't hungry for peace.

Martin made eye contact with Catherine, standing there at the front of the crowd. She gave her grandfather an encouraging nod, but Martin's train of thought had already derailed. The fiery eyes of the youth before him filled him with a certain feeling— a sense of dread, anxiety, and a revolting tinge of excitement.

Dublin

April 23rd, 1916

Easter Sunday

Martin found his eyes heavy as he lay in the straw bed of the tiny hotel room overlooking the River Liffey. Nonetheless, his Father read on from the leatherbound storybook.

“...And so Cú Chulainn gave the druid his final spear, and Lugaid, the wicked Prince of Munster, took one last throw at Cú Chulainn, mortally wounding him in the stomach.”

Martin snapped awake. “No!” he half yelled.

Father shushed him. “Cú Chulainn knew he was doomed, but he was unwilling to die lying down. Determined, he tied himself to a standing stone, his blade in hand, and for three days he stared down Lugaid's army, all of them too afraid to advance on him. Then, on the third day, a raven landed on his shoulder. They knew that the warrior hero Cú Chulainn was dead.”

Martin's jaw hung open as Father closed the book. "I don't get it," he said. "He had the spears! He could have killed Lugaid's entire army!"

His Father smiled, tucking the book back into his suitcase. "Yes, but remember: Cú Chulainn was a warrior of honour. He knew that if a druid asked him for his weapon, even in the middle of battle, he had no choice but to hand it over to him."

"So he died for nothing!"

"He died for his *ideals*," said Father. "And that's why he was a hero." Father stood up from the bed and walked to the window, glancing outside with an eagle eye. "We should get some sleep," he said. "We have a long day tomorrow."

"Are we gonna fight the British tomorrow?" asked Martin.

"I don't know." replied Father. He walked away from the window, picking up the copy of yesterday's newspaper on the bedside table. He scanned the headline on the front page for what must have been the hundredth time.

NO PARADES! IRISH VOLUNTEER MARCHES CANCELLED.

"I guess we'll just have to see, Martin."

Waterford

April 24th, 1996

Martin limped away from Parade Quay, turning quickly down a side street and leaning into his cane. His calf was throbbing, but he had nothing on his mind other than getting away from the crowd.

Behind him, Martin could hear Catherine's voice. "Grandpa! Grandpa!" she called, jogging after him. Martin had no chance of outrunning her, but he said nothing.

Catherine ran up alongside him. "Grandpa! What happened?"

"Nothin'," he said determinedly. "Nothin' at all."

"I know it's hard for you to talk about. I know-"

"That's got nothin' to do with it."

"But you can't just walk out on them."

Martin stopped. He turned to face Catherine, looking her in the eye.

She looked at him with imploring eyes. "Please, Grandpa," she said.

Martin sighed. He stiffened his lip. "Those people don't know war, Catherine."

"Of course they do. The Troubles are affecting everyone in the county, even in Waterford."

"No." Martin lost his focus on Catherine, staring down the quiet alleyway. "They don't know war like I do."

Dublin

April 24th, 1916

Easter Monday

Dad kept Martin close by his side as they speedwalked together through the morning-lit streets of Dublin. They had been awoken very early by the faint sound of gunfire. Father had excitedly scrambled out of bed, and quickly reassembled the battered old rifle that he had smuggled into their hotel room.

“Do you think it’s for real, Dad?” asked Martin, refusing his father’s attempts to hold his hand as they hurried along the Liffey.

“I don’t know. But we have to assume it is. The others are meeting at the post office. Let’s go.”

The General Post Office was an imposing building, dominating Sackville Street with towering white granite pillars. The street itself was quiet, save for a gathering of several dozen olive-dressed men near the bottom of the steps.

Martin followed along as Dad dashed to join the men. “McMahon is here! Michael McMahon!” he called over to them. The men waved him to join their huddle, but more and more uneasy eyes fell on Martin as he made his way to join them/

“McMahon, is this your son?” asked one.

“Yes. His name is Martin.” Dad seemed taken aback.

“You brought a kid to a bloody war zone? Even the Brits don’t do that!”

“I was told that E Company needed a runner, and I brought one. He’s barely a kid anymore. He’s twelve years old.”

One of the men pushed through the crowd towards Martin. He had a bushy ginger moustache, and sported a distinctive red cross armband on his uniform. A doctor. He knelt down in front of Martin.

“Sonny,” he said, “do you know what it is you’re getting into here?”

Martin nodded. “We’re fighting the British. We’re freeing Éire from our occupiers.”

Dad nodded with approval, shouldering his rifle. The doctor sighed. “Where’s your mother, son?”

“Waterford. But she hates the British too. I’m sure she’d be glad to know that I’m—”

“You didn’t tell your fucking wife, McMahan?” the doctor turned back to Dad.

Dad threw up his hands. “I don’t know what to tell you, Owens. He’s here now, and quite frankly—”

“Quiet down,” said a deep and raspy voice from the front of the crowd. “I said quiet down!”

The argument, as well as the rest of the murmurs among the men, came to a sudden silence. All eyes turned attentively to a man at the front, a well-built balding man in his forties. He had a distinctive silver-plated revolver on his hip, and held a letter in his hand.

“The boy will stay with us,” he said. “It is the duty of every Irish man and woman to do their part for the Republic.”

“So it’s true,” said Dad. “The revolution has started?”

“One thing at a time, McMahan.” He coughed into his arm. “For those who don’t know me, my name is Captain Stuart Bell. I am the commanding officer of E Company, First Battalion, Irish Volunteers. Some of you know me, and some of you I’ve never met before.” He looked up and down the crowd. “I’ll tell you all the truth, I was told our company would have some one hundred men. It seems we are only thirty-five.”

Without allowing for any comment, he opened the letter in his hands. “This morning, the Irish Volunteers made an announcement. We officially declare independence from the United Kingdom.”

Scattered cheers sounded throughout E Company, but Captain Bell silenced them.

“That’s enough!” called Bell. “That’s enough. Victory is a long way off.”

“What’s the plan, then, Captain?” asked a man from the crowd.

“We have orders to cross Grattan Bridge and assault Trinity College. With any luck it can act as a stronghold for us while we drive the British out of Dublin.”

While Captain Bell explained the admittedly dull mission plan, Martin looked up at the grime and sweat stained faces of the men standing around him. There was an air of excitement among them— an intoxicating mist of wanderlust and adventure the likes of which Martin couldn’t avoid inhaling if he wanted to.

The boy smiled. He knew this was to be more than just a war; this was the start of a story that would be told for generations.

“Shoulder arms, lads,” said Bell as he concluded. “We march on Trinity. For free Ireland!”

Waterford

April 24th, 1996

The Orange Helm had always been a favourite pub of Martin’s. Palming his half-pint of Guinness, he reflected on his memories of the place. They weren’t all bad, he thought. This was where he had reconnected with Owens for the first time in years, right at the start of the real revolution. This was where they had promoted him to a Lieutenant in the civil war. So much history right in this pub, thought Martin. Why was he, a tired ninety-three year old man, expected

to stand on a stage and preach violence to a crowd, when this pub had far more interesting stories to tell?

The bell at the door rang. In walked Catherine, joined by three young men about his age. He groaned. She had finally caught him. It figured; she was the only person who knew he'd be here.

“Grandpa,” she said, “I'd like you to meet some men. This is Eric, Elijah, and Thomas. They're with the Waterford Gaelic Society.”

“Afternoon,” said Martin quietly, taking a sip of his drink.

“Captain McMahon,” said one of them, stepping forward, “it's an honour to meet you, sir, really. We were just hoping for a moment of your time—”

“Why? So you can hear me tell you to go grab a pipe bomb and blow up a hospital in Belfast?”

“Grandpa, please—” interjected Catherine, but Martin had already stood up.

“You bloody young people, you think war is some game, some adventure... let me tell you, boy, it's not like in the pictures. The war... it took everything from me. And what do I have to show for it? Medals? The word ‘Captain’ on my pension papers? So forgive me, lads, if I'm not interested in waxing propaganda to you.”

Martin sat back down. One could hear a pin drop in the pub. Finally, the young man broke the silence.

“Sir... I'm sorry. We didn't mean to offend you. We don't want another war with the Brits, far from it. We just want to hear your story.”

“My story?”

“Yes, sir. Please. We’re writing for the Gaelic Society newsletter. Mr. McMahon, you’re the last surviving veteran of the Easter Rising. If you give us a chance, and tell us about the war, people will listen to you. We’re on your side here. If you don’t want war, give us a chance to spread your message.”

Martin sighed. He finished his half pint, feeling a slight burn in his chest. To hell with his doctor, he thought, life without a drink every now and then isn’t worth living.

“Alright,” said Martin. “I’m sorry for raising my voice. I’ll answer your questions, but don’t let me see this on a bloody IRA pamphlet.”

Dublin

April 24th, 1916

By the time E Company reached the bridge, British troops had already positioned themselves on the other side.

“For the Republic!” yelled Captain Bell as E Company began their charge. Martin made it roughly thirty feet before a deafening blast burst through his ears.

Martin cried out as he was suddenly knocked off of his feet. A screaming pain struck him in his lower body as he flew, landing on his back on the stone brick. His vision fuzzy, he looked over to the road from which he had been flung. Captain Bell was yelling something, and pointing at Martin. Owens ran over and knelt by his side as Martin slowly regained his hearing.

“...was a twenty-five pound shell,” yelled Owens. “Hang in there, Martin, we’re gonna get you out of here. Doyle! Come give me a hand!”

Captain Bell emptied his revolver at the British troops across the bridge, before waving to the rest of E Company. “We’ve got to fall back! They must already have artillery sighted on the bridge! We’ll regroup and try again later, we can still take Trinity!”

Only as Owens and the other man began to hoist Martin up did he get a proper look at his leg. His pants were soaked maroon with blood. The area around his shin had been ripped to shreds, and there was a thumb-sized chunk of steel lodged in his calf. Martin wanted to throw up.

“He can’t walk like this!” said a frustrated Owens. “Doyle, help me fucking carry him or he’s going to bleed out and die!”

“Look...” said the man, staring at something by the side of the road.

Martin glanced over. Laying still in the grass was his father, or at least what was left in him. His arm had been severed from his body, and his body was covered in blood.

Martin cried out. He was trying to say “Dad”, but it came out as nothing more than an incoherent yell as Owens dragged him across the battlefield. E Company was retreating.

“Go back,” screamed Martin, thrashing. “We need to go back!” His calf was burning. He found himself suddenly exhausted, unable to focus on the commotion.

Waterford

April 24th, 1996

“There aren’t many things in my life that I remember that perfectly anymore,” said Martin. “In the blink of an eye, my father was dead. War stopped being an adventure for me. I wasn’t Cú Chulainn anymore. I was just a twelve year old kid who wanted to go home.”

Elijah, the most talkative of the three men, was eager to note down Martin’s every word. “But you still stayed with the IRA.”

“You can’t just leave a battlefield in a pinch, lad.”

“Right, but I mean... you stayed for years. You became an officer. You fought in the revolution, and the civil war—”

“Yes, yes, and the Emergency— you kids call that the Second World War these days, I know— but you have to understand. Even when you’re a kid, even when you’ve lost everything to the enemy, there’s this invisible force that keeps your rifle in your hand.”

“Invisible force?”

“Call it Patriotism. Call it a love of the homeland. I carried a rifle for Ireland.”

“And what would you say to someone our age with your love of the homeland?”

Martin frowned. “Be careful who you love.”

Dublin

April 25th, 1916

“Word from Pearse!” said the messenger, snapping a salute to Captain Bell and holding out a piece of paper. “We’re retreating.”

“Retreating?” demanded the Captain. “Where in fuck’s name to?”

The messenger was panting. “The factory,” he said, pulling the rifle off of his back. “The Williams and Woods Factory. On King’s Inns Street.”

Captain Bell wiped his forehead. “We can’t fall back from the river. They’ll overrun us.”

“I’m just telling you what Pearse told me,” said the messenger, paper still in hand. “But we have to face the facts. The British are crossing every bridge in the city. They could be moving

on us right now. We're not going to take Trinity College. Our best bet is to hold out in the north and wait for more volunteers to arrive from Cork."

Bell sighed, twiddling his thumbs as he paced back and forth through the pub.

"These are direct orders, Captain," said the messenger.

Martin gripped his calf. The sharp pain had gone to a dull burning.

"Here," said Owens, kneeling next to Martin. "Let me change your bandage." He dug through his pouch and began to untie Martin's tourniquet.

The faint smell of smoke filled the room. Captain Bell had lit another cigarette. "Alright. E Company, let's fall out. We'll fall back to the--"

A shattering noise echoed through the pub. The window had been smashed open from the outside.

"GRENADE!" yelled someone. Owens grabbed Martin, pulling him to the ground.

Martin's vision went white. His ears rang. The bar was blown apart, splintering into fragments of pine. Bottles of liquor went flying, shattering on the walls and ceiling.

Martin's vision cleared. The messenger, with Bell's letter still in hand, lay motionless on the ground, blood dripping from his mouth. The Captain took cover behind a turned over table, firing his revolver wildly. "Owens! O'Flannigan! Grab the kid and get him out of here, for fuck's sake!"

"C'mon, lad, get to your feet," said Owens, helping Martin up. The boy clumsily staggered with them, unable to hear a thing over the rifle fire. Outside the broken windows, he could see five or six British soldiers across the street, trading shots with what was left of E Company.

Owens took Martin out the back door of the pub, a couple of other men joining them. “We’re okay,” said Owens. “Let’s get moving. Link up with First Battalion.”

Waterford

April 24th, 1916

“It was wishful thinking on Owens’ part to regroup with Battalion. Most of them had been killed or captured by that point. The Easter Rising was a complete failure, you see, doomed from the start. Half of the bloody republicans weren’t even in Dublin at the time. It’s a miracle that De Valera made it out alive.”

“That’s incredible,” said Elijah. He scratched a few more notes down, prodded a few more questions, and finally stood up. “Mr. McMahon, thank you. Thank you for everything.”

“Call me Martin.”

The two shook hands, and the two other men shook Martin’s hand as well. As the three of them turned to leave, Martin called out to them. “Kid,” he said.

Elijah turned around. “Yes sir?”

“Quit the IRA. It’s not worth it.”

Elijah’s face went pale. He hadn’t mentioned that he was in the IRA, but Martin could tell. He could see the fire in his eyes. Without another word, the three of them left the pub.

Martin took a sip of his water as his granddaughter said something about humility to him. He knew he hadn’t changed even one of their minds. But he had realized it was futile. The only way to teach the new generations about the battles not remembered, thought Martin, was to let them fight them on their own.