

***Easter 2016***

**By Mark Cornell**

‘It’s long forgotten now,’ came a voice behind me. I turned around to see a man in about his seventies, dressed immaculately in a brown suit and tie, with oiled grey hair. He’s got to be a Digger, I thought to myself.

‘How do you mean?’

‘St. Patrick’s Day Marches, they don’t march here anymore.’

‘You’re not wrong,’ I replied. The last march I was ever in was back in 1988. I remember it well because I took my two year old niece Erin, plus I’d just got back from Ireland and was feeling at a loose end. All people do to celebrate St Pat’s these days is drink heaps of green beer and sing along to live Irish music, I should know because I’m usually in the middle of it all. Toasting “Confusion to the Saxon” with my friends. I turn back to watch the silent movie in front of me, it was called, *Ireland Will be Free*.

It’s Easter 2016, the hundredth anniversary of the Easter Rising. I’d been feeling restless for weeks now, as mad as a March hare. I always go batty this time of year. I never know why. Perhaps it’s the changing of the Seasons from summer to autumn. Although autumn is my favourite time of the year, it means the savage heat of summer has truly passed. Maybe it’s got something to do with the position of the Earth around the sun. Who knows? All I know is I’ve got this knot in my stomach that needs to be undone. It’s a beautiful warm autumn day in Melbourne; I imagine it would be similar to the spring morning in Dublin on the first day of the rebellion, Easter Monday.

I’ve taken a few days off work for the Easter Holidays, the State Library has an exhibit called, *The Irish Rising, A terrible beauty is born*. It’s tucked away in a tiny section of

the Cowen Gallery, upstairs from the always chockers Reading Dome. It’s a tiny exhibit; a few pictures, documents, maps and an old black and white movie. There’s only six stools. By the time of the so called Great War, a third of Australians were of Irish ancestry. Yet there’s virtually been no coverage of the Easter Rising at all in the media.

I saw the pictures of Dublin smashed to smithereens by English artillery and fire. Ireland's largest city looked like something straight out of the Western Front. Some historians called the rebellion the "Ypres on the Liffey." Sixteen hundred volunteer men and women held out against the might of the English army for five days. Some Irish call it the "Gentle Revolution," as most of the Irish leaders were teachers, writers, poets, Trade Union leaders, white collar workers, women. A large part of them being not well versed with guns or rifles. The rebel's strategy was to take over key parts of Dublin in the hope that their actions would inspire a general uprising against the English. It didn't work, in fact most Irish people with their boys overseas on the Western Front fighting for England, were hostile to the rebellion. When the leaders of the revolt heard that over two hundred and fifty civilians had been killed, mainly due to the English artillery, they decided to call it off. You couldn't see a blood thirsty savage like Lenin or Hitler doing the same.

I'd assumed *Ireland Will be Free* was an Irish movie, but I suddenly recognized the jam packed streets of Melbourne. With crowds flooding off the footpaths onto the streets, people standing on top of shop verandas and leaning out of windows. Suddenly a shining motorcar appeared surrounded by a cortege of soldiers on white horses. The man inside the car waved regally to the crowd, I then I realized I was looking at Archbishop Mannix, the man who had helped to lead the No Campaign against Conscription during the Great War. What I saw next nearly knocked me off my stool; thousands of uniformed Diggers from World War 1, proudly marching in their uniforms behind Mannix. So much for the argument that the Catholics avoided the war.

"We used to call him "The Devil," said, what I took to be the wife of the old soldier behind me. Her grey eyes shone with mischief. I stared back at the movie to see many wounded and disabled men in cars and wheelchairs. The parade ended with the marching of thousands upon thousands of school children. The Devil I, thought to myself, as I recalled the bitterness between the Catholics and Protestants which lasted right until my childhood. My mother was excommunicated by her priest because she married a Methodist. My father refused to allow us kids to be baptised Catholic. My Catholic Grandfather used to call my Nana, "that Methodist wowser bitch."

The movie showed the school children dancing around a maypole and Gaelic dancing. I couldn't get over the clothes, the girls wore long flowing dresses with ribbons in their hair, the boys were in school or youth club uniforms. "Catholics are spastics," we used to chant to the kids in the Catholic school on our way to school. "Proddy frogs sit on logs," they chortled back to us in their purple uniforms. Sometimes there were fisty cuffs between the two tribes. Although they'd all be long gone by now, the kids in the movie probably experienced the same barbarity, I marvelled at how I was watching something that was almost a century old now.

Mannix used to call the First World War, "a sordid trade war," and couldn't see why a country on the other side of the globe should get involved in what was essentially a European conflict. He was horrified to learn that the leaders of the Easter Rebellion were court marshalled and executed within days of being captured. There's the infamous story of Trade Union activist, James Connolly, captured in a stretcher, then propped up in a chair so he could be shot by the firing squad.

*All changed, changed utterly:*

*A terrible beauty is born.*

Wrote W.B. Yeats in his poem, *Easter 1916*. There was outrage when the Irish discovered the cruelty inflicted on the rebel leaders. An outrage which quickly flew to Australia; Mannix would attract a hundred thousand people to his campaign against conscription and for an Ireland free of British rule. Ireland fought The War of independence from 1919 to 1922. This huge St. Patrick's day in Melbourne in 1920 was a show of support for the Irish cause. A support that extended to thousands of our soldiers, looking at all the faces in *Ireland will be free*; they all seem confident and happy. The soldiers have that unique Australian swagger and look of 'up yours mate!' The soldiers on the white horses were all Victorian Cross winners, there's a part in the movie where they're individually introduced to the camera, and encouraged to talk. God how I would give anything to hear what they had to say. The movie states that these men formed a committee to send a letter of protest to the English declaring that the Irish should be free God bless 'em !

Until today I had no idea about St. Patrick's Day 1920. We tend to focus on the tragedy of war. Mannix if he's mentioned is usually portrayed as meddlesome nuisance, even

a traitor. He fought against a Federal Labor government and a shrill commercial media. (The media hasn't changed much, neither has the Labor party.) There were only two countries who participated in World War 1 without conscription; Australia and Ireland. Knowing that they'd lost the good will of the Irish after the Easter Rebellion the English knew they couldn't push the issue with the Irish. In Australia the war had been dragging on for two years when Prime Minister Hughes twice tried to introduce conscription. In 1916 you could imagine thousands of war weary people; mothers, fathers, wives, sisters, brothers, daughters and sons who had lost their loved one, their vote, combined with Irish Australians and Trade Unionists helped to defeat the YES vote. It's a moment in our history that makes me proud to be Australian. Thank god we didn't send thousands of unwilling young boys off to the meat grinder of the Western Front.

We tend to think of the Australian army in World War 1 as one unified mass of men, however this movie I'm watching blows a hole in that theory, I wonder how many other Irish Australians servicemen marched in the other states on St Patricks Day? What's also overlooked; is that thousands of other soldiers wanted to forget about the war once they got home, and refused to march or join the RSL. Many, many suffered from dark psychological scars and had no idea how to deal with them apart from grog or violence inflicted on the people around them. Some say this trauma is still passed down through families today.

History doesn't tell us how the soldiers voted on conscription, some historians argue they voted No, because they didn't want to force conscripts into the carnage of trench warfare. A lot of Diggers were proud of the fact that their army was largely a civilian, volunteer force. Plus some Diggers doubted the reliability of a conscript; would they fight beside you in a desperate scrap? Some historians say the soldiers voted Yes, because they were desperate for men. We'll probably never know because it was a secret ballot. Although I can't imagine these men wanting to force the nightmare of the Western Front on their fellow human beings.

The movie reminds me of the Moratorium of the sixties and seventies where over a hundred thousand people took over the streets of Melbourne to protest against conscription and the Vietnam War. The protesters had the same look as the people in *Ireland will be free*; defiance, joy and solidarity. Conscription was abolished by Gough Whitlam in 1972, the same year he pulled our troops out of Vietnam. This triumphant moment in our history is slowly being lost in our collective memory too. I look around me on the train back home surrounded by dead eyed hunchbacks on their I Phones. The Digital Age! If you're seeking meaning then you need to lift your blue face off the screen and look out at the historical landscape passing around you. Even though I'm an agnostic, I spent the day with my tribe. The knot in my stomach has loosened a bit. When I tell my Mum on the phone later on at home what I've done today, she replies,

‘ We'll make a Catholic out of you yet.’

**Bio**

**Mark** is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favorite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.