



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL  
1989**

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**ISSN 0791-0655**

## Pierce McCan, M.P. (1882-1919) Part II\*

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by Deaglán Bric

— 1 —

'At half past four on the morning of the 3rd of May, I was awakened from my sleep by the significant sound of a police whistle . . . pulling the blind aside I saw soldiers moving cautiously in the grey dawn outside, while others on one knee "covered" the windows of the house with their rifles'.<sup>1</sup> District Inspector Henderson had been expecting resistance, and was surprised when Pierce McCan himself opened the door.

Henderson was armed, and accompanied by about ten police and 40 soldiers. Pierce was taken to Cashel. At 9.10 a.m. he left Cashel by train, under an armed guard which had been strengthened for fear of a rescue attempt. The train they boarded at Goold's Cross was the first to run to Dublin since the Rising.

At Kingsbridge (now Heuston Station) Pierce met the two Daly sisters from Limerick. That morning their uncle Tom Clarke had been executed; their brother Edward had been condemned by court-martial to be shot on the following day. At 3.00 p.m. Pierce arrived at Arbour Hill; at 6.30 p.m. he got his first meal since the morning, and that night he slept on the cell floor.

Immediately after the surrender on Easter Saturday evening, the arrests of Volunteers began. On Wednesday six Clonmel Volunteers (including Frank Drohan) were taken to Cork. On Thursday Seamus O'Neill was arrested in Rockwell College: he too was taken to Cork.<sup>2</sup> The total arrested in the country outside of Dublin was 1,881.

In Arbour Hill Pierce had about 125 fellow-prisoners; 25 were, like Pierce, given cells. The others spent the nights in an old gymnasium in the prison yard. Many of these were looters.

Prison conditions were severe. Breakfast — black cocoa and 6 oz. of dry bread — was at 9.00 a.m. Dinner was at 3.00 p.m. — a little soup (a bone with some meat on it), plus another ration of dry bread. Supper was served at 6.30 p.m. in their cells — porridge and more bread.

On his second night Pierce had a cell mate, David Bourke from Emly, and all prisoners were given two blankets. On the third or fourth evening about 80 prisoners arrived from Galway. The prisoners had no communication with the outside. Letter-writing and visiting were prohibited, and a fortnight elapsed before news reached Pierce's parents of his whereabouts.

Nor were the prisoners told of the aftermath of the Rising. Pierce wrote: 'One day we got a copy of the *Irish Independent* and saw to our horror that four more of the leaders had been shot. This was the first time we knew for certain that anyone had been shot.'

Nor did they know who among the other leaders had been executed. Pierce was crossing the yard when he saw Eoin Mac Neill walking up and down under armed guard. As they passed Pierce told him in Irish that his son Brian was safe in Ballyowen; then the guard forced Pierce to move on. Up to that Pierce thought that Mac Neill had been executed.

\*Part I appeared in the 1988 Tipperary Historical Journal. Any reader wishing to read Part I can obtain a photo-copy from the Editor for £1.50 (incl. postage) — Editorial note.



One thing Pierce missed was the lack of physical exercise. He complained about this to the prison doctor and soon after the prisoners were taken out to a gloomy yard for exercise. Here Pierce saw for the first time something of the aftermath of the Rising.

‘At one end a huge trench was dug . . . the full length almost of the end of the yard. A very small portion of the upper end of this grave, for grave it was, had been filled in. Under this filling lay the corpses of Pearse, MacDermott and the rest . . . who had been shot. Full boxes of quicklime were thrown on the ground nearby. There were a few empty ones there also, the contents of which had been doubtlessly thrown upon the dead bodies of my friends and fellow Volunteers of a few days ago’.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the week prisoners were being taken away. Some returned; others were taken to Richmond Barracks. The majority were tried and sentenced to three, five or ten years’ imprisonment. On the insistence of Fr. Augustine, an Augustinian who visited the prisoners, Pierce applied for permission to employ a solicitor. A Mr. Edward Byrne attended, but nothing came of it except that Pierce was late back to his cell and had to spend the night in the gymnasium.

Ten days after his arrest Pierce and the rest of the prisoners in Arbour Hill were transferred to Kilmainham jail. As they waited outside Kilmainham a car drove up and Eoin Mac Neill got out. He had been in solitary confinement in Arbour Hill, and now again was put in a cell on his own. Thomas McInerney, a blacksmith from Kinvara, was Pierce’s cellmate.

Life in Kilmainham was much better than in Arbour Hill. Though it was here that the last of the leaders to be executed had recently been shot, the new prisoners were well treated. Meals and exercise were more regular than in Arbour Hill; two hours in the evening were allowed for exercise.

While they were in Kilmainham Asquith, the British Premier, paid a visit to Dublin. During his visit the food improved, the prisoners getting a little margarine with the bread in the morning — and also a spoon, knife and fork each!

Mac Neill, no longer in solitary confinement, was allowed to mix with the others during exercise. Shortly after his transfer to Kilmainham Pierce met Mrs. Mac Neill, who arranged for food to be sent to McCan daily. About this time too Pierce met his father for the first time since his arrest.<sup>4</sup>

Suddenly on Saturday 20 May the prisoners were told that they were to be transferred that evening. McCan and McInerney, his cell-mate, marched with Mac Neill to Richmond Barracks, where the prisoners were put into rooms, each holding 25. That night Mac Neill said the Rosary in Irish with the others (including McCan) in the room.

Life in Richmond differed greatly from that of the other two prisons. Being a barrack rather than a prison, there was not the same insistence on discipline. Food was better and more plentiful, and the prisoners themselves served it. The soldiers on guard, mostly young men from the ‘Notts and Derbs’ regiment, did not enforce the prison regulations, often permitting prisoners in one room to visit those in another.

In this way Pierce met Count Plunkett one evening. On 22 May Pierce’s mother arrived. Although she arrived at 10.00 a.m. it was 2.30 p.m. before she saw Pierce, and then only for ten minutes and with a barbed-wire fence between them. Mrs. McCan complained of the treatment she had received, and as a result was allowed back twice the following week.<sup>5</sup>

A few days later MacNeill was told that his trial would soon begin. The evening before his trial he was offered a small room. McCan got permission to accompany him, and both were led to a small ante-room, containing a table and chair.



MacNeill studied some papers he had with him, while Pierce read from an Irish version of the 'Imitation of Christ'. They were about to go to sleep when an officer announced that at his wife's request MacNeill was to be given a bed in the barracks hospital that night. He was led away and Pierce returned to his own room.

Though they could see the court in session from their room, the other prisoners heard nothing of it for the three days it lasted. On the fourth day while out at exercise they heard a newsboy calling out 'MacNeill sentenced for life'.

Soon after MacNeill's trial the men in Richmond were taken away in groups, many being sent to English prisons. That Summer a total of 1,246 prisoners were transferred.<sup>6</sup> It was not until 1 June, however, that Pierce was deported. He seems to have been among one of the last groups of prisoners to leave Dublin. It was to Knutsford that Pierce was first sent. From there he sent his first letter home on 7 June. On 9 June he wrote: 'We are all in the best of spirits. . . I am sort of head gardener here: we hope to start a prison magazine soon, also Irish classes'.<sup>7</sup> Knutsford is close to Manchester, and the prisoners were frequently visited by people from that city. These visitors were very generous to the prisoners. One visitor to Pierce was a Fr. Hanrahan, stationed near Manchester, who wrote back to Ballyowen, after his first few visits.

On 10 June Pierce was placed in solitary confinement. According to the Commandant in charge, he got a wire from the war office that Pierce and another man were to be removed from all communication with the rest of the prisoners.<sup>8</sup> The same week four more prisoners were placed in solitary confinement. The following day all six were allowed to speak with one another, and none could understand why they had been confined.

Shortly after this it was rumoured that all prisoners were to be sent to an internment camp, where they would be treated as prisoners of war. On 17 June over 100 were sent to Frongoch in Wales.<sup>9</sup> Pierce McCan with some others remained in Knutsford a little longer. At that time he and four others were still kept away from the other prisoners.

Early in July Pierce was transferred to Reading Jail, a low-lying unhealthy place. This was clearly a deliberate move by the Government, since the majority of those sent to Reading were leaders in one degree or another.<sup>10</sup> Many of them were there when Pierce arrived, or came shortly after him.

Among his prison companions at Reading Pierce had some of the leading men in Sinn Fein or the Volunteers. In all there were about 28 prisoners there; they included Darrell Figgis, Tomás MacCurtain, Terence MacSweeney, Ernest Blythe and Arthur Griffith.<sup>11</sup> Here too he met for the first time since Easter Week his fellow Volunteers from Tipperary, Eamonn O Duibhir and Con Deere.<sup>12</sup>

Life in Reading, like that in all places of internment, was tough and monotonous, varied only by the prisoners' own activities. Handball and chess were the main pastimes during exercise hours. Arthur Griffith edited a weekly magazine. On 12 July, on hearing that the Orange parade had been banned, the prisoners held their own 'parade'!

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On 31 July 1916 Pierce McCan was released from Reading with six other prisoners.<sup>1</sup> No reason was given for the release, which may have been an attempt to reduce growing criticism of the retention of so many prisoners.

The initiative appears to have come solely from the British Government because the releases were a source of concern to the authorities in Ireland. In a letter to the Chief Secretary at Dublin Castle on 5 September, General Maxwell wrote: 'The release of Sinn Fein leaders of



importance such as . . . Pierce McCan and the possible release of others may lead to a revival of the Sinn Fein trouble in Ireland’.

There was also a fear of a Sinn Fein revival. Already a reaction had set after the May executions, which showed clearly in the newspaper editorials in August after Roger Casement’s execution. Martial law had been in force in Tipperary, and other areas since shortly after the insurrection. Maxwell’s letter sought further restrictions on the movement of the released prisoners.

The release of McCan and later of other Sinn Fein figures needs to be seen against a background of a change of mood in Ireland. Although the rising had been crushed and its leaders were dead or imprisoned, it gradually became clear that the rising had not failed. The spirit of the executed leaders somehow passed to the population, and the absence of any real leadership by the Irish Party at Westminster gave this spirit a more pronounced republican tone.

Sinn Fein became the organ for expressing popular feeling. Although the Rising had not really involved Sinn Fein, the detention of so many of its leaders in English jails made it the most suitable vehicle for the people’s feelings.

Other factors also helped to change the situation. The Sinn Fein movement organised financial aid for the prisoners and the dependants of those killed and wounded in Easter Week. The jails themselves became schools for Sinn Fein thought, where less ardent Nationalists came under the influence of more articulate comrades, and were confirmed in their resistance to British rule.

Important also was the influence of U.S. opinion. Irish-Americans, horrified by the executions, had held demonstrations all over that country. At the same time, with the World War taking its toll of Allied lives, Britain needed American intervention. With a Presidential election due in November, it was vital that the Irish-American vote would not be used against British interests.

Pierce McCan was among the first prisoners released. At Goold’s Cross station a large gathering met to welcome him, a sign that things had changed during his three months in prison. He wasted no time in resuming where he had left off before his arrest. On 7 August, though he may not have been present, he was elected to the Coiste Gnótha of the Gaelic League. At home in Dualla he re-started his Irish classes again.

In Volunteer work there was a lull for a time. Martial law conditions did not permit organised Volunteer activity. In September Seamus O’Neill, after his release from Frongoch, visited Tipperary, but found little activity there. However, by Christmas 1916 the Volunteer movement was active again. From now on Pierce became more and more active in the political side of things.

On 21 and 23 December 600 prisoners were released from Frongoch, and others were released around this time from Reading and elsewhere. From the early months of 1917 Sinn Fein made rapid progress; all over the country clubs were founded or re-established, and separatist nationalism began to re-assert itself. In February came the election as an M.P. of Count Plunkett; the British Government’s reaction to this victory was the arrest of 26 prominent members of Sinn Fein (among them Seán T. O Kelly, Tomás MacCurtain and Terence MacSwiney), of whom ten were deported.<sup>2</sup>

The election of Joseph McGuinness as M.P. in South Longford was another Sinn Fein victory; Kilkenny with W.T. Cosgrave followed suit in Autumn. The Clare election on 10 July had been of great importance because of its symbolic value, while the tragic death of Thomas Ashe in September brought another wave of support to the cause. In Cashel Pierce McCan spoke to a huge rally about Ashe, whom he had come to know well.



Of Pierce's activities around this time we have little knowledge, but he took an active part in setting up Sinn Fein clubs throughout the county. In July a number of inaugural meetings of clubs were reported.<sup>3</sup> Clubs formed in Clonmel, Rosegreen, Killenaule, Tipperary and Carrick-on-Suir.<sup>4</sup> McCan, Seamus O'Neill and Frank Drohan, addressed a meeting at Killusty on 25 July, and in the following weeks clubs were set up in Kilsheelan and Sologhead.

That Pierce was to the fore in all this work is borne out by his election on 28 August as chairman of the East Tipperary constituency. At the meeting held in Fethard, Sean Milroy, who attended for the National Council, addressed a large crowd from the town hall window.<sup>5</sup>

What of Pierce and Sinn Fein policy? There were many in that body who remained 'Home Rulers' merely. Pierce himself did not reject the concept of colonial Home Rule, which he had said at Thurles 'was a thousand times better than that wretched Bill Mr. Redmond was willing to accept'.<sup>6</sup>

However, he would not agree with Irish M.P.s going to Westminster. What was for him the essential purpose of Sinn Fein he outlined at Cashel in October: 'Sinn Fein stands for the right of Irishmen to live as freemen in their own country exactly as they willed. It does not matter one bit whether England's government of Ireland is good or bad. They want their government and they must get it'.<sup>7</sup> To him the kind of Home Rule Britain was offering was comparable 'to sending a man on to a few acres of land to eke out a living, without giving him as much as a spade to work with'.<sup>8</sup>

That McCan had become active again in the Volunteers is certain. Count Donal O'Kelly remembers conveying guns from McCan in Ballyowen to Fr. O'Rahilly, his superior, although O'Kelly was only a schoolboy at the time. These guns were for distribution among the Limerick Volunteers.<sup>9</sup>

At the South Armagh election of February 1917 a formidable canvassing team, including Ernest Blythe, Robert Barton and Pierce McCan worked from Poynts Pass. From there they mustered support for the Sinn Fein candidate, McCartan.<sup>10</sup> 'It was a great team with humour brimming over every difficulty: with true eloquence too, for Bob Barton and Desmond Fitzgerald were orators, and Ernest Blythe could talk to the people in his sharp dialect, using their homely metaphors'.<sup>11</sup>

Barton in his memories of the election campaign continued: 'Pierce was an ideal canvasser: his cheerful resolute mien, his high spirits and ready wit gave him entry everywhere. I enjoyed that week or so of political campaigning with Pierce more than I did any other. There was never a dull moment whilst we were at work, for Pierce seemed to be able to conjure up fun out of the most trivial incidents.'

Around this time Pierce became acquainted with Josephine Ahern. Involved in the Gaelic League work in the county Tipperary, she taught in a convent in Thurles. By May 1918 she was going on regular week-end visits to Ballyowen, and their engagement was about to be announced with Pierce was arrested for the second time.<sup>13</sup>

It was about this time too that he became involved in another important venture, the publication of an Irish paper, *An Stoc*. The paper, edited by Professor O Maille of University College Galway, was printed in Galway city. 'Sé a chuir an páipéar ar bun lena chuid airgid féin, agus le airgead a chruinnigh sé len a aghaidh, mar ba mhaith leis go mbeadh páipéar as Gaeilge ag Gaeilgeoiri Connachta le léamh agus nach mbeidis i dtuilleamaí na bpáipéar ainchristiúil a thagas as Sasana'.<sup>13</sup> There is no evidence about how involved Pierce was in the running of the paper, merely some of articles by him of a general nature in the paper.

Pierce had also continued to manage the farm at Ballyowen. He retained his interest in horses, and owned a racing horse which he named 'Sinn Fein'. In April 1918 he entered the horse for





**Ballyowen House — Pierce McCan's home.**

Punchestown races. However, on arriving at the course he was three minutes late declaring the horse so it was not accepted. Mrs. McCan's comment was that 'the rule would probably have not been so strictly adhered to but for the name of the horse and the politics of his owner!'<sup>14</sup>

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During the early months of 1917 Sinn Fein had received a further unexpected boost from the British Government. With the war in Europe taking its toll of soldiers, the question was asked in Westminster as to why Ireland was not subject to conscription. In April the Conscription Bill was passed in the House of Commons by 301 votes to 103. The Irish Party opposed the Bill, left the House in protest, and returned to Ireland to organise resistance to the Bill.

In Ireland the British Government's action brought many shades of public opinion together. The Lord Mayor of Dublin called a meeting at which an anti-conscription pledge was drawn up, to be signed in every parish on the following Sunday.<sup>1</sup> The following day the Catholic Hierarchy publicly supported the anti-conscription campaign.

The Irish Party announced its abstention from Parliament, and on 23 April most of the country came to a standstill because of a strike organised by the trades unions Congress. All over the country anti-British feeling grew; meetings, speeches, even novenas were held to defeat conscription.

Pierce McCan was very active in this opposition to conscription. In 1915 he had, after all, stood almost alone in Tipperary in his opposition to Irishmen fighting Britain's wars. On Sunday 15

April he addressed a monster protest meeting at Cashel. Hung across the platform was a scroll, with the words 'Vow of Tipperary — Death before Conscription'.<sup>2</sup>

People looked to the Volunteers to oppose any attempt to bring conscription into effect, and as a result the number of Volunteers increased rapidly.<sup>3</sup> The Government's reaction was to arrest the most active opponents of conscription. In February 1918 Sean Treacy and Seamus O'Neill were arrested.<sup>4</sup>

Then came the so-called 'German Plot' arrests. In April 1918 one Joseph Dowling was rescued by the police from an island off Galway. Although he claimed to be a survivor of an American wreck, he was found to have landed from a German submarine. His mission was believed to be to contact Sinn Fein leaders for the German Government. While the Sinn Fein executive knew nothing of him or of his mission, the event played into the hands of the authorities, who now went ahead with a series of arrests, and on 25 May issued a statement which claimed to give the background of the 'German Plot'.<sup>5</sup>

Among those arrested were de Valera, Griffith, Count Plunkett and Countess Markievicz. Of the Sinn Fein M.Ps only one (Dr. McCartan, then in the U.S.) was not arrested. Seventy of those arrested transferred to English prisons immediately, and others followed.<sup>6</sup>

Pierce McCan was arrested at 5 a.m. on the morning of 18 May. The District Inspector of the R.I.C. for Cashel drove to Ballyowen, and from the driveway called out: 'Mr. McCan, I want to speak to you'. Pierce recognised the voice; dressing, he made his escape into the garden by removing a bar from one dairy window, climbing through. In the garden he hid in a thick hawthorn tree.

In the meantime Mrs. McCan had opened the front door to the police, who rushed up stairs to find that Pierce had gone. The grounds were surrounded and searched; Pierce was discovered and driven away.<sup>7</sup>

Pierce had spent the previous few days arranging for his wedding. On 16 May he had gone to Waterford with his brother Anthony, where he bought a new bicycle for Josephine, which Anthony was to bring home on the train. Pierce himself returned home on his motor-cycle on 17 May. About a mile from Ballyowen he passed some policemen; they returned to Cashel to prepare to arrest him the following day.<sup>8</sup>

McCan was brought to Clonmel, to find Frank Drohan in the barracks. Both were led handcuffed to the station and from there to Limerick Junction.<sup>9</sup> It was only there that they learned of the reason for their arrest, being brought to Dublin.

Throughout the previous night Sinn Fein leaders were arrested and brought to Dublin Castle, among them de Valera, Darrell Figgis, Arthur Griffith, Barney Mellows, Joe McGrath and Dr Richard Hayes. All were taken to Kingstown (now Dun Laoghaire), and put on board a gunboat. That evening the boat, with McCan and Drohan now aboard, finally left, reaching Holyhead at 10 p.m.

Here the prisoners spent two nights, and early on Monday morning (20 May) were divided into two groups, one for Gloucester, the other for Usk.<sup>10</sup> Both groups travelled by separate trains to their respective jails, and on the way saw the effect of the Government propaganda on the 'German Plot'. When those for Gloucester stopped at Birmingham for tea on a side-platform, a crowd gathered and shouted slogans of hate and derision. At Gloucester, as they marched two deep from station to jail, a crowd followed them hooting and booing with cries of 'shoot them' and 'traitors'.<sup>11</sup> Those travelling to Usk had a similar experience.

On arrival at Gloucester Jail the Sinn Fein party demanded treatment as prisoners-of-war, and got almost all their demands. Those denied included the sending of letters, the reception of





visitors and communication with the outside world. Pierce McCan's description of the daily timetable is informative and humorous:

'At 5.30 a.m. the bell to rise is rung; none of us get up. At 6 a.m. the warden opens our door and says in a monotonous tone, like a machine, "All right"; we are all still in bed. At 6.15 a.m. he calls out "anyone for a bath?". About four of us as a rule get up, and after a little delay he brings us to the baths; those who don't go usually stay on in bed. At 6.50 a.m. I sound the bell for morning prayer. We gather then on the ground floor and I give out the prayers, half in Irish, half in English. At 7 a.m. we take our meals in groups, three at one table and two, Desmond Fitzgerald and Dr. Dillon, away in the gloomy end of the prison outside Fitzgerald's cell. Two of the men eat all their meals in their cells by themselves. Arthur Griffith and Joe McGuinness take their meals on one side of the balcony . . . we supplement the prison food by parcels from home'.

Pierce put his handy-work to use in prison. From an old apricot tin he improvised a kettle and saucepan; this he hung over a gas jet to make tea or cocoa or to boil eggs. 'Out of an empty biscuit tin we have made a frying-pan in which we sometimes fry the little pieces of bacon supplied by the prison'.<sup>12</sup>

The prisoners had two periods of daily exercise — from 9 a.m. until about noon, when dinner was served; and again from 2.30 p.m. to 4 p.m. Handball was the most popular outdoor sport, and many prisoners played chess. Pierce was among the better handballers; 'he was one of the strongest men in the prison and excelled in . . . rounders and handball'.<sup>13</sup> Both McCan and de Valera were men of outstanding physique, and the prisoners gathered around them in the yard as they threw the weight!

About a week after arrival in Gloucester, the Gloucester party was reduced by the transfer of some to Lincoln and Reading jails; de Valera was among those sent to Lincoln. With McCan in Gloucester remained Arthur Griffith and about ten others.<sup>14</sup> These included Sean McEntee, Joe McGuinness, Desmond Fitzgerald and Tony Hunter.<sup>15</sup> Pierce and Arthur Griffith became close friends. Griffith, who had not yet mastered the Irish language, began again in prison to learn it; Pierce taught him.<sup>16</sup>

The summer of 1918 dragged on for the prisoners. On 30 May Pierce wrote: 'The Government still refuses to let us write or receive letters. The only object they can have as far as we can guess is to prevent us from letting the world know that their talk about a 'German Plot' is a mere fabrication . . .'<sup>17</sup> Some weeks later Lord Wimborne, recently Lord Lieutenant for Ireland, said in the House of Lords: 'It seems strange that . . . neither I nor any member of the Irish Executive had been aware of the existence of the plot until it was discovered by the British Government'.<sup>18</sup>

In December 1918 the first of the 'German Plot' prisoners died. Pierce had made the acquaintance of Dick Coleman at the training camp in Wicklow in 1915. A letter he wrote on hearing of Coleman's death is full of irony in the light of McCan's own fate.

'I know Dick Coleman who died in Usk. He was an exceptionally nice fellow. Only twenty-seven years of age, he was full of life and love, being only a short time engaged when arrested. The callous and cruel injustice that tore him away from his country and those he loved, and kept him for seven months untried and unconvicted in prison . . . must have caused him terrible suffering. I know his death brought the brutality of the whole thing very forcibly before me'.<sup>19</sup>

Even before Coleman's death, however, the position of the Sinn Fein prisoners had assumed new proportions. On 11 November, 1918 the Germans surrendered and World War I came to an end. Soon after this Lloyd George, the British Premier, announced that a general election held in December. To Sinn Fein this signalled the start of a new campaign. A year earlier they



had decided that the return of peace would be the signal for action. They would wait only then to re-declare the proclamation of an Irish Republic. The election would give the people an opportunity to support or oppose the establishment of a *de facto* Irish government, by voting for or against Sinn Fein candidates.

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Pierce McCan was chosen to contest the East Tipperary seat, and the campaign for his election began on 22 November in Clonmel. The chairman reminded his listeners how the Fenian O'Donovan Rossa had been returned to the East Tipperary seat by an open vote in the courthouse at Clonmel 49 years before. Then he spoke of the sequel to this in the election of Mitchel, the Young Irelander.

The Irish Party candidate, Condon, had been a Lord Mayor of Clonmel. At a meeting in Cashel (in November also) Dean Innocent Ryan spoke on Condon's behalf. The Dean's speech gives some idea of the opposition to Sinn Fein.

'I am here today not as a politician, but as a priest . . . not to express sympathy with the claims of an individual but to support a principle . . . Personally I have great respect for McCan. I hope nothing injurious or unjust will be said or done to him. But this is no matter of personality or friendship; it is a matter of great principle. I am sorry to see McCan identified with Sinn Fein, which is so reckless and dangerous. . . . I am compelled to add that Sinn Fein is at present not only reckless and dangerous, but terrifying and unholy . . . because in this election Sinn Fein is identified with socialism, the pest and the curse of modern society.'

The Dean based this allegation (he said) on a hand-bill circulating in support of McCan. 'It told the labourers that by voting for McCan they'll be voting against all right to private property . . . The agents of Mr. McCan invite the labourers of Tipperary to throw Pope Leo XII overboard and make James Connolly their pope'.

The Dean explained how socialism was based on the poor man's envy of the rich. 'But even the ten commandments allowed for private property. Which of the two will you believe, the Lord Almighty or the new Moses, Pierce McCan?'. The central issue (he concluded) was not one of abstention from or attendance at parliament, but whether socialism or catholicism should rule in Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of this vigorous speech it is clear that many clergy supported Sinn Fein and McCan. Father Matt Ryan of Knockavilla was one of his most active supporters. Furthermore, as was pointed out to Dean Ryan at a meeting in Clerihan, Bishop O'Dwyer, Archbishops Walsh and Mannix and Bishop Fogarty had all come out in favour of Sinn Fein.<sup>2</sup>

When on 4 December, nominations closed the two Sinn Fein candidates in north and in mid-Tipperary were returned unopposed. Polling-day in Ireland was 27 December. Pierce was refused permission to send a message to the people before the election, but somehow he managed to smuggle out a short note, which appeared on posters throughout the constituency.

Sinn Fein scored a decisive victory. From six seats they won 73 out of a total of 105. Of the 73, 43 were won by men then in jail. Pierce McCan had a big majority, polling 7,487 votes against Condon's 4,794.<sup>3</sup> In South Tipperary Sinn Fein had a similar majority, where John O'Mahony got 8,744 against 2,701 for Cullinane, the Irish Party candidate. It was January 1919 before Pierce heard of his election. On 1 January the newspapers reported the release of Count Plunkett. It was now expected that the release of the other prisoners would not be long delayed. For Pierce, things must have looked more promising now than at any other time in the previous seven months.



Throughout both Ireland and England the great influenza epidemic raged during the latter half of 1918 and the early months of 1919. In October there were fatalities in Tipperary town, Thurles, and Clonmel. By mid-November 19 patients had died in Tipperary workhouse from 'flu.

In the English jails the Sinn Fein prisoners suffered the full effects of a bitterly cold winter.<sup>1</sup> During January and February rumours of impending releases spread; all proved false, and some of the prisoners decided to escape.

On 16 January 1919 four prisoners made a sensational escape from Usk while being transferred to Gloucester jail. Early in February, following a plan prepared by Collins and Harry Boland, de Valera escaped from Lincoln jail with two others. In Gloucester an escape being planned was postponed on the news of de Valera's escape. There had been a serious 'flu outbreak in Gloucester towards the end of 1918. In January 1919 the epidemic hit the town again. McCan wrote: 'So far none of the boys have taken it, thank God, but two of the wardens have, and the doctor thinks that it is more than likely that it will spread to the prison . . . some of the men are very run down . . . and will be bad subjects to resist influenza. However, God is good and if it be his will he will save us from a repetition of the Usk Tragedy'.<sup>2</sup>

The day after he wrote this letter Pierce told Richard Brennan he had been talking to the prison doctor, and on hearing that no precautions were being taken had complained to the doctor. Pierce's fears were justified; on 28 February Arthur Griffith telegraphed from Gloucester prison that eight internees had been removed to a nursing home in the town. They included Dr. Dillon, Frank Drohan, Sean McEntee, J.J. O'Connell and Pierce McCan.

Of the eight Pierce was in the best condition. He had become ill on 25 February, but when being transferred to the nursing home 'he walked down the prison stairs and was apparently in high humour, and passed jokes with his fellow prisoners'.<sup>3</sup> On the following Monday Griffith wired to Dublin and noted that McCan was recovering.

Meanwhile, a prison warden had died in the epidemic after two days' illness, and a convict in another prison wing. On Tuesday 4 March Pierce became suddenly worse, and his parents were sent for. His condition deteriorated rapidly; he developed pneumonia and also probably bronchitis.<sup>4</sup> His parents were with him on the Wednesday and Thursday, and on Thursday 6 March Pierce died.

On the evening of McCan's death came the announcement by the Chief Secretary of the immediate release of the prisoners. The first to be released were William T. Cograve and Laurence Ginnell, who arrived back in Ireland on the next day. Because of Pierce's death there were no demonstrations at their arrival.<sup>5</sup>

That Friday night McCan's remains were removed to Holyhead. 'Impressive scenes . . . were witnessed all along the route'.<sup>6</sup> At Gloucester a large crowd of citizens had gathered to pay their respects. At Holyhead some prisoners who had just been released bore the coffin on their shoulders from the vehicle to the steamer.

The coffin, draped in a Republican flag, arrived at Westland Row (now Pearse) station early on Saturday. Some 500 Volunteers and a large crowd awaited its arrival. Harry Boland, Con Collins and Seán O Muirthile, as well as Michael Collins on behalf of the new Dail Government, bore the coffin to the hearse. Then, preceded by 100 Volunteers and followed by another 50, the hearse moved to the Pro-Cathedral.

After Mass, the cortege, now close on 10,000 strong, moved through the city centre. All available members of the Dail were present; de Valera alone could not disclose himself. Somewhere along the quays a British officer tried to halt the cortege to allow a military lorry to pass. Bystanders responded by throwing the officers, with motorcycle and side-car, into the Liffey.<sup>7</sup>

At Kingsbridge station Michael Collins, Boland, O Muirthile and Con Collins carried the coffin to the train. On the train, accompanying relatives and friends, a body of Volunteers travelled, as did Michael O'Flanagan, Cathal Brugha, Richard Mulcahy, W. T. Cosgrave and Darrell Figgis. Along the route large crowds gathered at each station.

Thurles station was packed by Volunteers from every parish in Tipperary. The Archbishop of Cashel received the remains at the Cathedral. From the pulpit he said: 'In May 1918 he was interned in Gloucester jail in connection with the German Plot which no just man believes in, and of which Lord Wimborne, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, said he had no knowledge. During the long months Pierce McCan was kept in prison . . . Now he is dead and beyond the . . . tyrannical power of the British Government'.<sup>8</sup> That night a Volunteer guard stood by the bier as streams of people filed past the coffin.

'Sunday was a unique day in Thurles. The like of it was never seen before, and is not likely to occur again. Those who witnessed the Archbishop Croke funeral or the McCormack funeral admit that both of these demonstrations were small in comparison'.<sup>9</sup> The funeral left Thurles for Dualla at 2.30 p.m. Every step of the way was lined with mourning spectators. The procession itself was about four miles long, with carriages, motor-cars and other conveyances following the Cashel Brass & Reed band. It took the hearse some three hours to cover the ten-mile journey.

In the twilight the crowd gathered around the grave in Dualla as Fr. Matt Ryan of Land War fame first addressed the crowd. Then he introduced Cathal Brugha. Pierce and Cathal Brugha had been close friends, and Brugha's graveside oration in Irish was full of poetic memories.

'Tá an martar múinte is déanaí againn sínte ós ár gcomhair anseo. Tá Piaras uasal árd-aigeanta Mac Canna tar éis scarúint linn go deo. Na súile glasa gealgáireacha tréna dtaithneadh a anam gan eagla orainn, táid iadtha go bráth ag an mbás millte . . . do shamhail-se, a Phiaras, a bhí in aigne Thomais Dhábhais an uair a dúirt sé gur lucht córach a dhéanfadh náisiún dár nEirinn arís. Cad is ciontach leis an mí-adh sin? A Rí na Gloire, an fada a bheidh orainn cur suas leis an bhfóir-éigean seo?'<sup>10</sup>

Pierce McCan had already answered Cathal Brugha's question. On the wall of his cell in Gloucester, among the Irish inscriptions his fellow prisoners noted down as they prepared to leave, was the following:-

'Fan go fóill beag agus cífir deire go mear na holcaibh.'

## Footnotes

### Chapter 1

1. *O Broin Papers*: 'Three months in English Jails', an account of his detention written by McCan, on which this chapter is mainly based.
2. *Cluain Meala 1916*, (Clonmel, 1966), pp 13-14.
3. See n.1.
4. *Ibid*; also letter to Mrs. Kelly, Galway, 18-5-1916.
5. Letter to Mrs. Kelly (*O Broin Papers*), 25-5-1916.
6. State Paper office (hereafter SPO,) file 19264, Carton 5627.
7. Letter to Miss Eithne O'Kelly 9-6-1916 (*O Broin Papers*).
8. Letter to Mrs. O'Kelly, 15-4-1916.
9. Brennan-Whitemore, W.J.: *With the Irish at Frongoch* (Dublin, 1917), p 6.
10. O'Luing, S.: *Art & Griofa* (Baile Atha Cliath, 1956), p. 271.
11. National Library (hereafter NLI), MS. 8469(3), leaf from Griffith's Diary.
12. *Ibid*; also *Blathfhléasc O Thiobrad Arann* (1943), p. 60.

### Chapter 2

1. *O Broin Papers*, 'Unsent Letters', p. 9.



2. Macardle, D: *The Irish Republic* (Dublin, 1951), p. 209.
3. *Nationalist*, 4-6-1917.
4. *Nationalist*, July 1917.
5. *Nationalist*, 29-8-1917.
6. *Nationalist*, 5-9-1917.
7. *Nationalist*, 3-10-1917.
8. *Nationalist*, 21-11-1917.
9. Interview with Count Donal O'Kelly.
10. Hogan, D.: *The Four Glorious Years* (Dublin 1953), p. 1.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
12. *O Broin Papers*; Mrs. McCan's account.
13. *Irish Independent*, 6-2-1947.
14. See n. 12.

#### Chapter 3

1. Macardle, *op. cit.*, p. 250.
2. *Nationalist*, 17-4-1918.
3. Dan Breen, *My Fight for Irish Freedom*, (Tralee, 1964), p. 31.
4. Ryan, D. *Sean Treacy and the Third Tipperary Brigade* (Tralee, 1945).
5. Macardle, *op. cit.*, pp. 253-254.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *O Broin Papers*; Mrs. McCan's account. Bk. III p. 1. One local version of his capture says that the family dog gave him away by barking at him in the tree!
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Nationality*, 15-3-1919.
10. Figgis, D.: *A Second Chronicle of Jails* (Dublin, 1919), pp. 30-31.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
12. *O Broin Papers*; 'Unsent Letters.'
13. *The Times*, 7-3-1919.
14. *O Broin Papers*; Unsent Letters, 6 July, 1916.
15. Brennan, Robert: *Allegiance*, (Dublin, 1980) p. 202.
16. *Blathfheasc O Thiobrad Arann*, *op. cit.* p. 62.
17. *O Broin Papers*; Unsent Letters, p. 42.
18. *The Times*, 21-6-1918.
19. *O Broin Papers*; Letters to Mrs. Kelly, 14-12-1918.

#### Chapter 4

1. *Nationalist*, 27-11-1918.
2. *Nationalist*, 30-11-1918.
3. *Nationalist*, 28-12-1928.

#### Chapter 5

1. Figgis, D. *op. cit.*, p. 100.
2. *McCan Papers*: Letter to Fr. Hackett, 20-2-1919.
3. *The Times*, 6-3-1919.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Hogan, D.: *op. cit.*, p. 63.
6. *Tipperary Star*, 19-3-1919.
7. *Nationalist*, 26-3-1919.
8. *Tipperary Star*, 15-3-1919.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Blathfheasc O Thiobrad Arann*, *op. cit.* p. 61.

### Primary Sources

#### A. Manuscript Material

1. *O Broin Papers* (consisting of the following items):
  - (i) Extracts from diary kept by Mrs. McCan.
  - (ii) Unsent Letters - written in Gloucester Prison 1918.
  - (iii) Recollections of Pierce by Robert Barton.
  - (iv) 'Memories of Pierce' by Countess O'Byrne.
  - (v) Letters to Mrs. Kelly, Gurtray, Co. Galway.



2. *Mc Can Papers*
  - (i) 'Three months in English Jails' - written by Pierce McCann; account of 1916 imprisonment.
  - (ii) Letter from Fr. Hackett C.S. Sp. to Mrs. McCann after Pierce's death.
3. *State Paper Office*
  - (i) C.B.S. No. 3, Intelligence Notes, 1913-1916.
  - (ii) C.B.S. 12183, Carton 23: Letter to Chief Secretary from General Maxwell, 5-10 1916.
  - (iii) C.B.S. 19264, Carton 5627: R.I.C. figures regarding 1916 Rising.
4. *National Library of Ireland*  
8469(3): leaf from Arthur Griffith's diary.

#### B. Printed Material

*Cluain Meala 1916* (Clonmel 1966) - recollections of 1916 by those in Clonmel who were active at that time.  
*Blathfheasc O Thiobrad Arann* (Conradh na Gaeilge 1943) — essays by Volunteers and Gaelic League workers of Pierce McCann's time.  
 Figgis, Darrell: *A second Chronicle of English Jails*, (Dublin 1919).  
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*List of Students*, Clongowes Wood College, Clane, Co. Kildare.

#### C. Newspaper Material

*Nationalist* (Clonmel)  
*Clonmel Chronicle*  
*The Tipperary Star*  
*The Irish Volunteer*  
*Nationality*  
*An Claidheamh Soluis*  
*Sinn Fein*  
*An Stoc* (Galway)

#### D. Interviews with Contemporaries of Pierce McCann

- (i) John Ryan, Dualla.
- (ii) Count O'Kelly, Dublin.
- (iii) Anthony McCann, Meath.
- (iv) Patrick O'Kennedy, Cashel.

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