

Family History

Author Fran Christ's recounts her personal stake in researching "John Kenny and the Easter Rising":

"How the project got started. . . ."



(above) Mother and daughter, Elizabeth Kenny and Fran Christ

My mother, Elizabeth Kenny Gilroy never met her grandfather, John Kenny. He was ostracized from the family and no one ever spoke to her of him. She assumed he had died before she was born. My aunt, Anne Kenny spoke to all of us, however, about the part my great-grandfather played in the Easter Rising.

One story told me about him took place much earlier, sometime between 1885 and 1891. John Kenny had moved his family back from New York to the farm where he was raised in Kilcock, County Kildare. He set up a stud farm as a "front" for laundering funds coming in from the U.S. (John Kenny was an excellent business man and very good with numbers.) His children were constantly warned never to tell anyone anything that went on at home, nor to tell who they had seen entering and leaving the house.

Recently, people who are not family members have told me that John Kenny ran very high-level meetings in Kilcock. His then-youngest daughter Margaret, age 7, would be sent out to deliver a cake to a neighbor's house.

This would be the signal that a meeting would be held that night, at whomever's house the cake had been delivered to.

A second family story was the one I paid attention to: according to my aunt, my great-grandfather attended a meeting in Dublin at which someone rushed in to warn that the British were on to them. My great-grandfather traveled safely back to New York but everyone else at the meeting was eventually captured and executed by the British. I knew nothing about Ireland or Irish history and had no way to confirm or deny either story.

Four years ago my mother came across the name John Kenny in Peter de Rosa's book *Rebels*. My mother mentioned it to me casually, wondering if it could have been John Kenny, her grandfather.

That summer on a trip to Ireland, I happened to mention it to a man I was speaking to on the phone, Kevin Lynch, who is from John Kenny's hometown, Kilcock. As luck would have it, he is an avid Irish historian. By the time I returned to New York, he had gone through his books on the Easter Rising and photocopied many references to John Kenny.

Now I was hooked. I set out to see if this John Kenny and my mother's grandfather were the same person. The date on my great-grandfather's death certificate sent me searching for an obituary in the Clan-na-Gael newspaper, the *Gaelic American*. While fast-forwarding the microfilm I stopped the machine to see what date I was up to—and there was an article about John Kenny commemorating the execution of Tom Clarke, whom apparently he had been close to. The article pointed me to the series of three articles John Kenny wrote about his two missions in 1914, on which I based this article.

I found the obituary. The John Kenny in the *Gaelic American* proved indeed to be my great-grandfather.

Since then, browsing through microfilms of the *Gaelic*

"My mother came across the name John Kenny in Peter de Rosa's book *Rebels* . . . wondering if it could have been John Kenny, her grandfather."

American, I've come up with a half a file drawer full of articles on or about John Kenny. And on my first trip to the American Irish Historical Society, I came across a file folder named "John Kenny" which contained the paper trail of the mission!

Meanwhile, my relatives have generously sent me books, articles, personal effects, and photographs. The Irish Family History Forum, the American Irish Historical Society, and the Irish Bookstore gave me valuable help, as did Judy Opitaw, librarian at my Lynbrook, New York local library, who tracked down censored newspapers and out-of-print books. Kevin Lynch researched the family in Kilcock, sent me books, and helped put my findings in historical context. Finally, I'd like to single out my aunt, Sister Mary Kenny, for the special encouragement she has offered.

It was very interesting to my mother and aunts to discover that John Kenny was living in New York when they were young (although with the exception of one of the older girls they never met him). They now believe their father was secretly meeting his father in New York. John Kenny was separated from his family—either because his wife was tired of the strain that his political activities placed on the family, or for other personal reasons. But he

always supported them very generously and was greatly admired by his daughters.

There are many aspects of John Kenny's life that we still do not know about, but I'm going to continue my research. This summer I will be researching in Dublin. I look forward to meeting Kevin Lynch with whom I've been collaborating on this research for nearly four years. I will see where John Kenny lived (and my grandfather grew up), sites of meetings he attended, and locales where the actual fighting took place in the Rising. And I hope to track down files kept by the British on my great-grand father.

If any readers have leads they think might help me in my continuing quest, I'd be grateful if you'd contact me at mchrist599@aol.com.

—Fran Christ

(below) Collage of articles from the *Gaelic American* narrating the exploits of John Kenny, from which author Fran Christ's learned the history of her great-grandfather.

April 26, 1924
The Gaelic American

John Kenny's Trip to Germany

COURIER OF CLAN-NA-GAEL RAN GAUNTLET TO REQUEST ARMED AID FOR IRELAND

Handed Document Signed by Leaders Here to Von Flotow, Berlin Ambassador at Rome, and Convinced Him That Redmond's Pledge of Loyalty to the British Empire Did Not Represent Irish Sentiment... Kenny Given Imperial Pass to Germany and Late Visited Ireland Where He Consulted With the Chief of the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

THREE

e Von Beulow

KAISER WOULD HAVE RECEIVED AMERICAN COURIER BUT CHANGE IN MILITARY PLANS INTERVENED

May 17, 1924

Clans Only Irish

CLOSE COMMUNION WITH I. R. B. IS REVEALED BY JOHN KENNY, WHO ACTED AS LIAISON OFFICER

Delivered Largest of the Many Sums of Money Put at Disposal of Dublin Headquarters to Put Rifles in Hands of the Volunteers and Brought Back to John Devoy Full Report on Secret Conditions in Ireland, Together With Leaders' Plans to Perpetuate the Work in Case of Their Failure.

By JOHN KENNY.

Woodrow Wilson's policy of "neutrality even in thought," proclaimed by him in 1914, was commended and acclaimed by the pro-British press, and by all the disguised agencies of British

safely also to bring back report of conditions in Ireland. I replied that I was only too willing to go, but reminded him what Tom Clarke said about my being permitted to go further than Liverpool, and that some way should be contrived to have him notified in the event of my being detained, so that