

# Denis O'Connor

BY ALFRED ISACSSON, O. CARM.

He was delirious from fever and his moanings made no sense. He was muttering something about settling this thing and stopping the boys from killing one another. Those standing around the bedside knew that the end was not far away. Denis O'Connor, the Carmelite priest, had spoken at an outdoor rally in New Jersey despite the onslaught of rain. When he came home that February, 1924, he was not well. Going to bed at his priory, he did not become better. What seemed to be a cold turned into pneumonia, and he was brought to the hospital. Not in favor of the 1921 Treaty, he regretted the deaths and destruction it brought. As he lay there close to death and delirious, he would say to his doctor referring to the recent Irish Civil War, "Those poor lads don't know what they are doing, killing one another; write to them, Doctor, you can make them understand. They are fine lads. Plead with them and they will stop."<sup>1</sup>

## HIS VISIT TO IRELAND

These were hard words to understand coming as they did from a supporter of DeValera and the anti-Treaty party. O'Connor had been so devoted to that cause it was hard to understand any tolerance he had for the opposition. He had been assigned during the years 1909–1916 to Transfiguration Church in Tarrytown, New York, a quiet town on the banks of the Hudson just north of New York City. It was quite suited to his own quiet temperament.<sup>2</sup> In 1916, in the wake of the failed Rising, Denis O'Connor went to Ireland for a provincial chapter. He had been elected to attend and was then chosen to preside at the gathering. Those opposed to his work among the New York Irish saw his trip as a step

taken to eliminate Republican activities.<sup>3</sup> However, he was moved in such a way by all of what he experienced in Ireland that he vowed never to return to Ireland during the "war." O'Connor had become an American citizen



because he believed the Irish had to bring their minds and hearts to America as well as their bodies. Because of this citizenship, he was shadowed in Ireland by the British and had to notify the local authorities of his travels. Because visitors like himself were imbued with the concepts of justice and fair play, it was said that the British were to have them removed, thereby creating rumors of deportation. Lootings and beatings had marked the arrival of British troops in

Dublin. Prisoners returning from incarceration in England found their jobs taken.<sup>4</sup>

O'Connor was so affected by these things that he later proposed at a *ceilidh* in Manhattan's Carmelite Hall bringing an Irish mayor to New York so he could describe to Americans the evils of the English occupation. \$1,000 was voted to carry out this plan.<sup>5</sup>

All this changed the character of Denis O'Connor. From being an Irishman whose affection for his homeland was not evident, he became an activist promoting the cause of Irish freedom. I believe that what he saw on his trip to Ireland did more than disgust him. It motivated him to join the Irish Republican Brotherhood or the *Clan na Gael*. Only such an enrollment can explain his complete change to an activist with an all-consuming effort to promote the freedom of Ireland.

O'Connor's return from that chapter in Ireland saw his transfer to the pastorate of Our Lady of the Scapular fronting East Twenty-eighth Street on Manhattan's East Side. The Carmelites'

**Photo:**  
Denis O'Connor,  
O. Carm., taken  
around 1915 when  
he was assigned to a  
church in Tarrytown,  
N.Y. Courtesy of  
Alfred Isacsson,  
O. Carm.

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priory was at the rear of the church and fronting East Twenty-ninth Street. A few doors to the west was the Carmelite School, a large four-story building with an auditorium and basement. With the advent of O'Connor, all of these facilities became devoted to what we can call Irish activities.<sup>6</sup>



The classrooms of the school were devoted, outside of regular school hours, to classes in Irish dancing and music. History and Irish culture were also subjects in the classes. In the school, he established the New York College of Irish in 1920. The auditorium was open to anyone requesting its use. Meetings, lectures, and plays were some other uses. When people objected to one Irish organization using the hall, O'Connor's response was that anyone who wanted to book it for the promotion of Ireland was welcome to the hall anytime.

The Carmelites did not have a branch of the Friends of Irish Freedom (FOIF) until a year after it began, but they made up for this lost ground by becoming the largest and the most active branch. When Judge Daniel Cohalan gained control of the FOIF and withdrew its support from Eamon DeValera, the Carmelites and O'Connor brought the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic (AARIR) to the parish in November, 1920. O'Connor was as supportive of the AARIR as he had been of the

FOIF. This switch of O'Connor's support caused John Devoy to refer him as a "non-entity." In one stretch of time during 1921, O'Connor spoke to twenty-two councils of the AARIR.<sup>7</sup>

When nationalist leader Liam Mellows came first to the United States after April, 1916 to foster good opinion for the Republican movement, it was Denis O'Connor who took him under his wing and got him settled. He gave Mellows employment in his school teaching history, among other Celtic topics. In return, Mellows taught O'Connor how to play the violin. O'Connor expressed his gratitude by playing "The Counlin" at a memorial service held after Mellows' execution in 1922. When Austin Stack and J. J. O'Kelly (*Sceilig*) came to the United States on a fund raising expedition, O'Connor and his Council held a meeting to plan a fund raiser. Held at the Lexington Theater, the affair brought in \$65,000 of which \$1,000 came from the Carmelites. The Carmelite Council had pledged \$1,000 for the Republic Defense or the Campaign Fund. When O'Connor reminded them at a meeting of this promise, the Council gave \$160, the Carmelites \$100 and within five minutes the remainder was collected from the membership.<sup>8</sup> Having speakers like Mrs. Terrence MacSwinney and Kathleen Barry at the Carmelite Council kept it connected to the homeland. All of these activities were focused to one goal: support for Eamon DeValera leading to a republic and complete separation from England.

Actions that would not be done today were also part of O'Connor's support for the freedom movement. His Twenty-ninth Street priory was an arsenal where guns and ammunition were collected for shipment to Ireland. It was also a collection point for the large shipment of Thompson submachine guns that were seized in 1921 on the steamer *East Side* docked at Hoboken. Part of this operation was the collection of funds to purchase arms and ammunition. As state treasurer of the AARIR, O'Connor was the collector of \$26,528 in funds. Approximately \$30,664 was collected for the Refugee Fund, and records in the papers of Eamon DeValera credit Denis O'Connor with \$36,586 in other funds collected.<sup>9</sup>

All this came from a man born December 16, 1871 in England at Beere Axmouth on the

**Photos:**

(top) People lining up for a novena to St. Thérèse during the pastorate of Denis O'Connor at Our Lady of the Scapular around 1920.

(above) Following O'Connor's death in 1924, Eamon DeValera recalled O'Connor's opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 and his support for Anti-Treaty leaders. Courtesy of Alfred Isacson, O. Carm.

Channel coast of Irish parents. This site of O'Connor's birth was due to his father being employed by the Coast Guard and stationed at the Axmouth light. Denis was partially raised in Kinsale, Ireland because his father was transferred to the Kinsale light. He went to the Carmelite's Terenure College from where he entered the order taking the name of Finbarr in religion. After his ordination in 1895, O'Connor spent a year in Ireland but went to Gawler, Australia, in 1896. During his five years in Australia, he was so into Irish music that when the archbishop visited, they had a *sessiun*. This was against the spirit prevalent then in Australia where it was thought better to keep aloof from Irish affairs as they end up in a row. This was not the spirit followed by Denis O'Connor.

#### O'CONNOR AND DEVALERA

After five years in Australia, O'Connor was assigned to Our Lady of the Scapular, Manhattan. In 1909, he went to the Transfiguration Church in Tarrytown, and after seven years he returned to Our Lady of the Scapular. It was there in June, 1919, that he welcomed Eamon DeValera, fresh from prison into the United States. Years later and after the passing of O'Connor, DeValera would recall this and the assistance the Carmelites gave him.<sup>10</sup> O'Connor had the facility of being connected to the Irish heroes of his day. At a meeting in 1921 to rally support for hunger striker Terrence MacSwiney, O'Connor is supposed to have given his best speech ever. When news of MacSwiney's death came to the rally gathering, O'Connor used a request for prayers to calm the riotous crowd. He was able to make the Dublin funeral of Harry Boland and had Masses offered for him, Liam Mellows, and other fallen heroes. When Father O'Flanagan came to America, O'Connor not only was in charge of his reception but also gave him a room in his priory.<sup>11</sup>

O'Connor was also involved in the arrangements for Archbishop Mannix's 1920 visit. When the Archbishop was coming from Albany to New York by a Hudson River dayliner, Denis O'Connor and Monsignor Luke Evers traveled by rail to Poughkeepsie, boarded the liner and accompanied Mannix to New York where he was met by a large group including Archbishop Patrick Hayes.<sup>12</sup>

It is a mystery how O'Connor got away with his attitude towards World War I. While other parishes displayed banners of stars and numbers for their parishioners serving for the United States in the war as well as gold stars for the deceased, O'Connor would permit no banners for servicemen. His point was that such soldiers were fighting for Britain, America's ally, and were continuing the British oppression of the Irish people.

The manner of his final illness and passing indicate that Denis O'Connor gave his life for the Irish independence movement. Details of his final illness and death are few and conflicting. Perhaps that is significant for it was his life that was important.

### Notes

1. McCartan, Patrick, *With DeValera in America* (Dublin, 1932) 40.
2. *Acta Capit. Prov.* May 10, 1909 in *Hib, Capit et Cong* (1900–64) Archives of Order, CISA, Rome, Italy; Isacson, Alfred, *Carmel in New York, 1906–26* (Maspeth, [1978]) 74–77.
3. *Irish World* (NY) Oct 28, 1919.
4. *Ibid.*, Sept 30, 1916
5. Isacson, Alfred *The Carmelites of New York and Their Involvement in the Irish Freedom Movement, 1916–1924* (Maspeth, [1977]) 40
6. Carr, William *The Irish Carmelites of New York City and the Fight for Irish Independence, 1916–1919* (Middletown, [1975]) 50.
7. Isacson, *The Carmelites* 54–5.
8. *Irish World* (NY) Mar 25, 1922, Apr 1, 1922; Isacson, *Carmel*, 149–50.
9. 150/1030 DeValera Papers, University College Dublin; Fitzpatrick, Dennis Harry Boland (Cork, 2003) 145.
10. Flanagan to DeValera, Bronx, Oct 14, 1939 150/1281, DeValera Papers, University College Dublin; DeValera to Flanagan, Nov 23, 1939, Telegram, Archives New York Province.
11. *Irish World* (NY) Mar 8, 1924.
12. *Irish Press* (Philadelphia) July 24, 1920.

## 600 MACHINE GUNS SUPPOSED FOR IRISH TAKEN ON SHIP HERE

Latest Type of Quick-Firers  
Found in Coal Bunkers of  
Outgoing Vessel.

AMMUNITION ALSO SEIZED

Customs Men Find \$150,000  
Cache Following Reports of  
Plan to Smuggle Guns.

MAY HAVE BEEN STOLEN

Change in Crews Led to Information  
of Plot—Fourth Search Re-  
vealed War Supplies.

Six hundred machine guns, believed by Federal authorities to have been destined for Ireland, were discovered by customs agents yesterday on board the steamship East Side at Hoboken and later were seized on a search warrant by the Hoboken police. According to one report the ship was bound for Belfast, but this later was denied. The seized machine guns, known as the Thompson sub-machine guns, and made by the Colt's Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Company, were the latest development of automatic quick-firing small arms. Guns of this type, capable of firing 800 shots a minute, recently were acquired by the riot squad of the New York Police Department. The machine guns, together with other supplies of ammunition, a small quantity

#### Illustration:

In June, 1921  
guns and ammunition  
aboard the steamer  
East Side, intended as  
a secret shipment to  
Ireland, were seized at  
the dock in Hoboken.  
Denis O'Connor's priory  
in Manhattan served as  
the collection point for  
the shipment. Courtesy  
of the New York Times.