

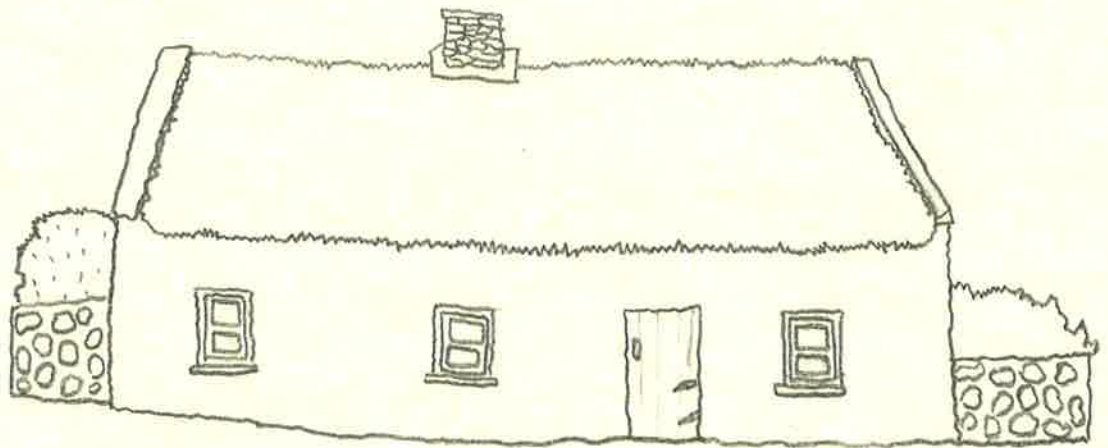
THE CONNOLLY FAMILY'S MEMORIES

1916 -1923

When I think of last year and the celebration of 1916 and the stories of the people and events of the last century, I remember the stories my own family told me. I think of my home in Lahana and what it was like during the times. I think of my grandfather Jerh and my granduncle Stephen who were children during those times. I think of the stories from my nan about how hard it was growing up in rural Ireland in the early part of the 20th century.

It would be a shame if these stories were ever forgotten because these stories belong to us all. These times and events helped shape our families and our communities today.

My grandad Jerh was the youngest of 13 children. He was born in 1919 three years after the Easter rising. The farm he was raised on provided all the food for the family. Pigs and cattle were reared and they were sold in the local market in Drimoleague railway yard. Some pigs were kept for the family to eat. Potatoes and vegetables were grown to feed the family. They all lived in a single story three roomed house on the farm. There was no electricity or running water.



The children went to the local schools at Knockbue and Derryclough. When they were around 11 years old they often went to work on neighbours farms. Most of the time they just worked for food. There was no secondary school or college for children in the area. If they were lucky enough they might train as a carpenter or a blacksmith with a local tradesman. The most common story was that one son would stay on the farm. Other younger family members would help out growing crops, tending animals and saving turf in the local bog to provide heat in the winter. As the other children grew up they would try to find work on other farms or from tradesmen. Eventually they would save up enough money to buy a boat ticket to emigrate to England and find work there. Wages were so small that it would often take years to save the money especially if they had to give some money to help out the family at home.



My granduncle Stephen was born in 1907. He was a half twin. His sister was called Eileen. Rearing two babies when there was already a number of children was very difficult in those times so Eileen was reared in Reavouler by her aunt and uncles who were not married. Uncle Stephen had a disability from a young age. His right leg was shorter than his left so he always walked with a limp. Children did not have shoes and doctors and medical treatment were only for well off people. If you had a disability you coped as best as you could and learned to live with it.

Uncle Stephen was very good with horses and raising poultry. However because of his leg he was not able for manual labour on the farm. At the age of 14 uncle Stephen went to work in O Donovan's Hotel in Clonakilty. He worked in the kitchen peeling potatoes and washing dishes. Work was hard but he did not have to do much walking and he was earning money to help the family at home in Lahana. Later he would train to be a chef and this would help him later in life when he went to England with his brother.



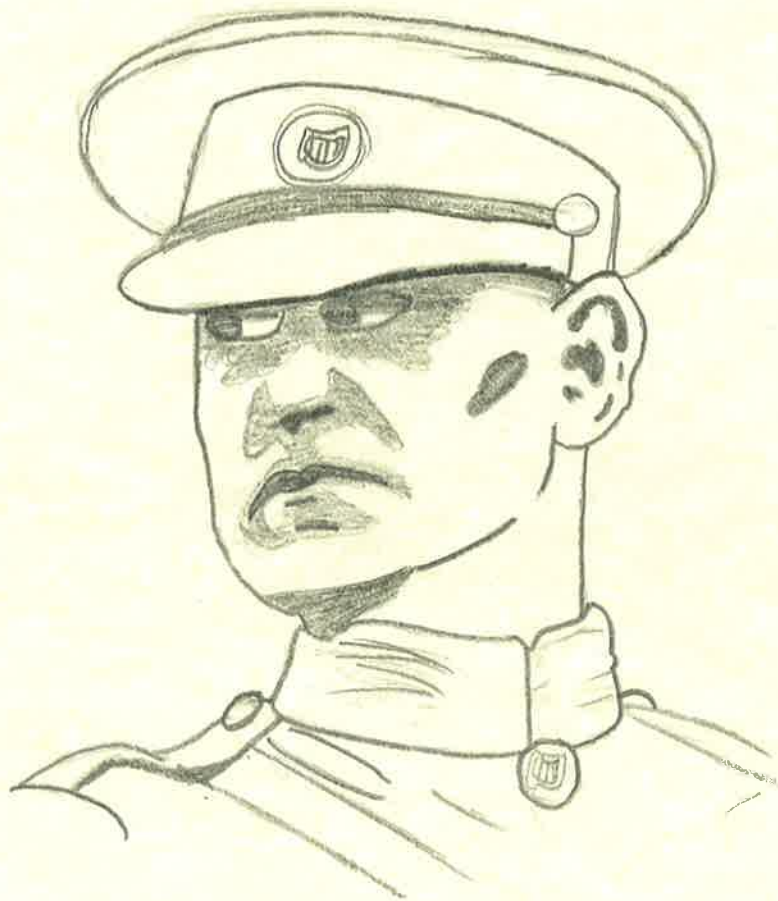
When Uncle Stephen started work in O Donovan's Hotel in 1921 it was a very busy place. These were the years of the War of Independence. He would tell his nieces and nephews that you had to be very careful what you said to guests and patrons. They would talk about the weather and their health and that was all. The War of Independence ended in late 1921 but there was a lot of mistrust about the treaty that ended the war. Uncle Stephen would tell stories about the soldiers that stayed in the hotel. He would say that as the weeks went on the Free State soldiers became very noisy and misbehaved. There was a lot of crime in Clonakilty and some of the soldiers were a law unto themselves. This went on for several months.

In 1922 Ireland was in the midst of the Civil War. This was a very difficult and dangerous time in Clonakilty. Crime and lawlessness was very common in the town. This led to shootings and Uncle Stephen would get very sad when he recalled the shooting of a local guard in the town.

In August 1922 General Michael Collins came to Clonakilty. He was doing a tour of West Cork to improve discipline and morale among the different garrisons in the area. The Free State Army had not had the type of training that soldiers from other counties had. Most of the soldiers were recruited to fight in the War of Independence. Their training was very hurried and basic and now these soldiers were asked to do all sorts of duties they had not been trained for.

On August 22nd 1922 Uncle Stephen met General Michael Collins. At this stage Michael Collins was the leader of the country. He was the commander in chief of the Free State Army. He had negotiated the Treaty of Independence with the British which he described as a stepping stone to establish the republic declared in the 1916 proclamation. However many of those who fought in the War of Independence did not think the treaty was good enough and that led to a civil war in Ireland between 1922 and 1923.

Uncle Stephen described Michael Collins as the biggest man he ever saw. He wore a soldiers uniform with a long overcoat. He had jet black hair and piercing blue eyes. When he walked into the hotel people stepped out of his way in case he walked over them. The local army division all assembled in the courtyard of O'Donovans Hotel. Uncle Stephen watched them from an upstairs window. Michael Collins spent an hour shouting at the soldiers. Some people said they could hear him roaring at the other end of the town. When the soldiers left the yard they were pale, shaking and none of them could say a word.



Michael Collins stayed for a while in the hotel talking to locals and then left in the afternoon. At around 8 o'clock that evening word came to the hotel that Michael Collins had been shot and killed at Beal na Blath. Uncle Stephen remembered how people were crying and all the workers in the hotel were told to go to their rooms and lock the doors for the night. It was very frightening for everyone. In the days that followed there were masses and prayers said for Michael Collins and that brought people together in their grief.

Uncle Stephen later moved to England and stayed there until after World War 2. He lost his leg in the London bombings and returned home to Ireland with a false leg in the early 1950s. His stories to my dad and his brother and sisters remind me that history is real and is lived out by people we know and love. In years to come my family will be asking me about the events of my life and what it was like when Brexit happened and Donald Trump became President of America and the O Donovan brothers won silver at the Olympics and was Zlatan really that good!!

I never met Uncle Stephen as he passed away in 1988 but he feels part of my life as my dad and my aunts and their cousin Tim from England are always talking about his life and using sayings that he had as he lived with them at home in Lahana. I love listening to these stories and hearing about Uncle Stephen as his stories and his life are a part of what makes my family, my school and my community special.



Uncle Stephen at home in Lahana in 1983 with his sister-in-law, Eileen (my Nan) and niece, Mary, (my Dad's cousin from England)

AIDAN CONNOLLY

FOURTH CLASS DERRYCLOUGH NATIONAL SCHOOL

AS TOLD TO HIM BY HIS FATHER DERRY CONNOLLY

LAHANA DRIMOLEAGUE CO. CORK

Illustrated by classmates Nikki Noonan (Michael Collins)
and Marcus Adams (Cottage and O'Donovan's Hotel)