

So, what did you do in the war, Grampa?

*A family mystery unraveled
80 years after the Easter Rising*

By Helena Mulkerns

Nineteen ninety-six was an interesting year for history in Ireland, one of reevaluation and remembrance. The debate on the Famine gained momentum and provoked renewed research into the tragedy, and there was a marked rekindling of interest in the 1916 Rising on its 80th anniversary, ironically much more enthusiastic than that inspired by either its 50th or 75th commemorations.

This was due in part to the breathing space accorded by the peace process, and partly, also, to the release of the film version of the life of Michael Collins. It constituted an unwitting turning point for many younger Irish, since for the generations born in the 1960s and '70s, that period of history has often remained cloudy and elusive.

At school, we were taught about the glories of 1916, but mysteriously tumbled out of the summer break before learning what followed. At home, while some family elders took pride in their involvement, others maintained an almost sacrosanct silence. It seemed we were permitted to

learn the heroism of the Rising, but the horrors of the War of Independence — and worse still, the Civil War — had become secret and shadowy. We had only a vague idea of what our grandparents experienced.

This year, however, suddenly the stories began to be told. I learned of my paternal grandfather's unusual involvement in the War of Independence, and subsequently some fascinating and little-known facts that give Michael Collins a Hollywood connection long before 1996.

The story starts 80 years ago, in a small village in North Wales called Frongoch. Once a thriving community producing a popular brand of whiskey, in 1916 its only, grim business was a fairly large military detention camp built to house German prisoners of World War I, captured on the Western Front. By June, however, the German prisoners had been dispersed around England to accommodate the prisoners detained after Ireland's Easter Rising of that year. More than 2,500 Irishmen were arrested and shipped to English prisons in cattle boats after the failed rebellion, and Frongoch, it was decided, would be ideal to house the Irish rebels in isolation and with



Michael Collins and the famous bicycle and his body double, George Brendan Nolan (inset), aka George Brent.

reasonable security.

Among the camp's inmates was Michael Collins, transferred from Stafford Jail. He would use Frongoch to organize a tight group of trusted internees in the study of guerilla warfare, espionage and, more darkly, assassination.

During that summer, life in Frongoch was relatively tolerable. The guards were relieved to be spared the horrors of the Somme, and the prisoners put their civilian talents to use inside the camp, which had its own classes, activities, and even entertainment.

The Rajah

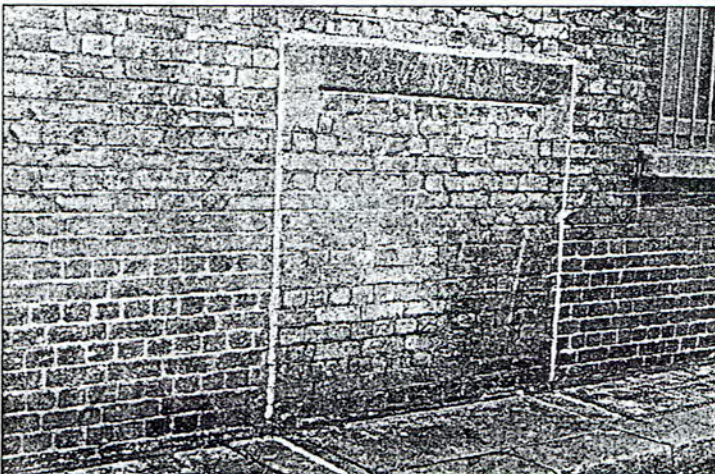
At this time, one of the most popular events on the compound was the performance of a weekly variety show, which was participated in and created by the camp inmates themselves, and emceed by one of Collins's friends and fellow inmates, Jimmy Mulkerns, my grandfather.

Mulkerns, a comedian, singer, juggler and magician who'd had his own touring theater company before the Rising, is described thus in Sean O'Mahoney's 1987 book, "Frongoch: University of Revolution": "His talents earned him the esteem of the prisoners, and he was one of the most popular prisoners in Frongoch. . . His introductions of the various artists was a 'turn' in itself."



Collins loved his weekly act, highlighted by his satirical political songs, sung to the tunes of current hits of the day. Jimmy's glittering home-crafted oriental costume earned him the title "The Rajah of Frongoch," a name he would later use to publish his satirical songs.

As the summer ebbed into fall and winter, however, the tolerant atmosphere disappeared as Britain's struggles in the Great War grew more severe. Frongoch became a more brutal place, with the men suffering increasing hardships and illness. There were hunger strikes and protests, medical facilities were poor, and the British author-



The bricked over entrance to the cellar of 13 Trinity St. in Dublin, where Michael Collins, George Brendan Nolan and Jimmy Mulkerns plotted against the British Empire.

ARTS & LEISURE

ities were unwilling to improve them, despite the earnest efforts of the local doctor, who pressed for supplies. Some men contracted illness from which they died after they were discharged. Conditions were so bad that one prisoner went mad.

In a sad and moving twist of fate, the body of the doctor was discovered one morning after he had drowned himself in the river that flowed below the camp, presumably from the stress of working under hostile superiors who wanted their medical responsibilities kept to a minimum.

By the time the prisoners were released in December, they were well prepared for the grueling War of Independence. They were divided into batches according to the direction they were traveling home in, but many would meet again in future battles — sometimes on opposing sides.

Over the next few years, Collins defied and infuriated British intelligence by never hiding from his enemies, calmly walking the streets of Dublin and never sleeping in the same house on two consecutive nights. By 1919, with the country under a reign of terror as the War of Independence progressed, Collins practically had the entire British Secret Service on his tail.

One of the most effective tactics he used was to employ a number of doubles to act as decoys on days of important missions or meetings, in order to divert attention from himself. In Dublin, his most convincing double was a young actor named George Brendan Nolan. A tall, well-built young man that fit Collins's official description, Nolan was interested in the stage but was also a full member of Fianna Eireann. For many months he played the dangerous but successful role of stand-in for Ireland's most wanted man. He would conspicuously attend a public meeting or event, as a "Big Fella" in expensive suits, and since the authorities were never quite sure what Collins really looked like, they would follow him, thereby leaving the real leader free to go about his business.

No. 13 Trinity St.

Besides his many Dublin safe houses, Collins kept a secret base in the city center where he could receive parcels or messages and where he or Nolan could drop in to pick up one of two identical bicycles, or items from several complete wardrobes kept vigilantly there by former Frongoch stalwart — The Rajah.

My grandfather had returned from Frongoch and later Ballykinlar prison camps with a shock of dove gray hair and having lost his taste for combat. While he continued to write his hilariously irreverent songs and move in theater circles, he took a civilian job with the General Electric Company, then moved to No. 13 Trinity St. But he didn't quite give up his dedication to the cause, or to Michael Collins.

With one of the world's first guerilla wars was under way in the streets and the wilds of Ireland, he served a quieter soldier's term by acting as covert guardian of his chief's immaculate clothes, possessions and the famous bicycles, making sure to be on the premises whenever Nolan or Collins needed to drop by. Mulkerns had the only keys to a locked-off cellar storage room in No. 13 that had its own special, unobtrusive

entrance in the laneway around the side of the building.

It must have been an interesting diversion for the other employees of the British-owned General Electric Company to try to figure out the strange comings and goings in the cellar. But then again, it was an era when it was better not to see too much, and, above all, to "say nothing."

Family lore also cites the arrival and storage of a continual supply of unusually heavy boxes in the basement room, delivered by B&I Shipping to one James Mulkerns of the (non-existent) "Irish Electrical Company" throughout this time. Unfortunately, no records of this traffic remain today, and one can only guess at the true nature of what were described on the customs slips as "electrical fittings."

As Dublin raged through the Troubles, Collins fought on with his large army of undercover agents, which included typists and secretaries employed by the British government in Dublin Castle's intelligence headquarters. While he — and thereby his

It was another mutual friend of Collins and my grandfather's, the late Professor Sean Neeson of University College Cork, who was able to eventually clarify the facts about Nolan's disappearing act. According to Neeson, when Dublin Castle issued a warrant for Nolan's arrest that charged him with treason against the state, a crime punishable by execution, Collins's spies immediately informed the leader, who thus arranged Nolan's urgent, secret escape out of Cobh harbor in County Cork. As the Black and Tans thundered through the quiet village of Watergrasshill, just 12 miles away, bent on arresting Nolan, he was already bound for New York and a new life. They had missed their quarry by only a few hours.

When Collins's doppelganger reached New York, he discarded his identity as George Brendan Nolan of Fianna Eireann and took on the rather flashier name of George Brent. He became a success on the thriving Broadway stage. By the early '30s, he had reached Hollywood, where his handsome looks propelled him into a career as a

interesting to note that the one film he absolutely refused to make was one of Samuel Goldwyn's large-budget ventures of 1936: "Beloved Enemy". That film's plot revolved around a famous "Irish patriot" (blatantly modeled after Michael Collins) and featured a silly love story and some unlikely intrigue that implied that the British army was involved in the Irish Civil War. The film was one of the few that flopped at the box office during Goldwyn's 50 years of film making.

History uncovered

George Brent finally returned to Ireland from Hollywood in about 1970, almost 50 years after his departure from Cobh, to live in a ranch-style stud farm in County Wicklow. According to James Cagney in his autobiography, Brent was fulfilling a life-long wish. But returned to the U.S. only a few years later, complaining that he just "couldn't take the cold."

He died in the sunnier climes of Hollywood in 1979, 57 years after Collins's death, and 22 after that of The Rajah, whose story has only reached my generation through the recent new awareness that is burgeoning in Ireland. It is possible that the silence was necessary for a time, or even the natural outcome of a Civil War. Interestingly, despite the fact that journalists down the years periodically probed Brent to reveal the secrets of his early years, like many of our grandfathers, he never discussed his role in the Troubles.

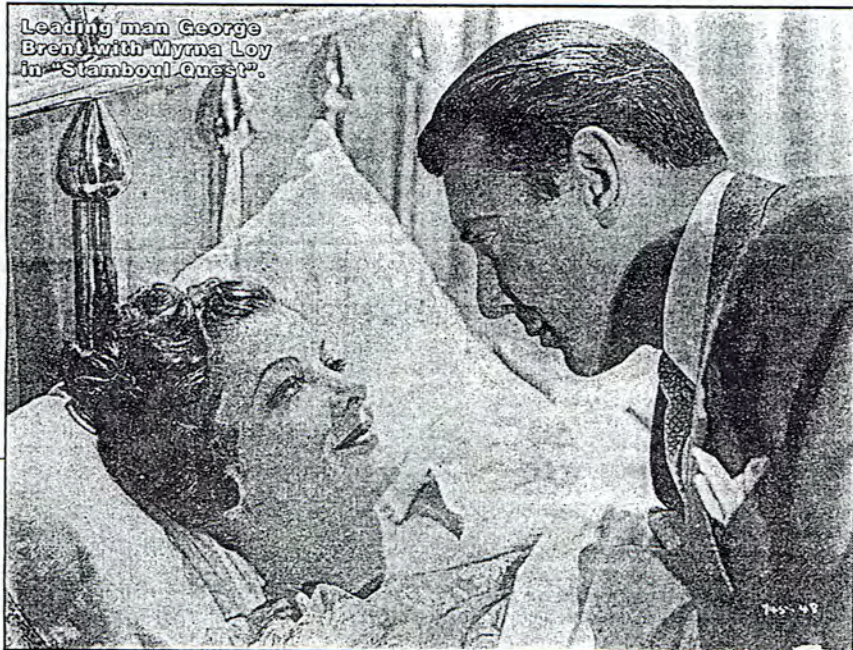
For the generations that have followed, the heaviest toll is the detail, the hard facts — a loss indeed. The paperwork, mementoes, letters and even the original B&I packing slips for the "electrical fittings" have been lost down the years in my family, leaving only one strange manifestation of the story.

On a nondescript city wall that lines the side lane of 13 Trinity St. in Dublin (now the offices of the magazine Hot Press), if you look carefully you can find the outline of the cellar door, bricked over many years ago, that once opened into the secret offices of the "Irish Electrical Company".

If walls could talk, as they say, what an interesting yarn might be had from the stone. Tracing out the lines with your fingers along the surface gives a better idea of the entrance, prompting a fleeting glimpse of its young rebel custodian, quietly unlocking the door to receive his mysterious shipments, to greet George Nolan, or, of course, Collins himself, whose genius at intelligence and subterfuge contrived such a simple scheme.

But could the walls tell of what inspired The Rajah's flamboyant, hilarious performances on a crudely lit prison-camp stage to the cheers a ragged group of rebels, or how Nolan must have felt in a distant Broadway dressing room when he heard the news from Beal na Blath of Collins's assassination? Not really, these details are only accessible through the powers of the imagination, and perhaps by the grace of parents, or grandparents, if we are lucky, who can help us to fill in the gaps. The outline in the brickwork in Trinity Street remains just so many arbitrary patterns on a wall, mute and mortared cracks in the seam of history.

Time to hear the stories.



Leading man George Brent with Myrna Loy in "Stamboul Quest".

close colleagues — were under constant threat of death or capture, Collins often knew the destination of secret agents before they set out.

With widespread Black and Tan violence and the increasing summary executions that had become the order of the day, Jimmy Mulkerns was deeply concerned when one night, without warning, George Nolan disappeared from Dublin without a trace. In the confusion of the war process, and the refocusing of Collins's energies in the political arena, he would not unravel the mystery until years later.

Matinee idol

In the mid-1930s, Nolan showed his face again in Dublin, this time on the screens of the hundreds of little cinemas dotting the city. Mulkerns, by then a family man with two young movie-happy sons, was amazed to see his war-time colleague again, not in an "In Memoriam" notice but on the big screen, where he had metamorphosed into a Hollywood actor.

gentlemanly leading man.

Brent went on to star in almost 100 films of Hollywood's golden era, a popular matinee idol whose charms played well off screen beauties such as Greta Garbo, Barbara Stanwyck, Olivia De Havilland, Ginger Rogers and Myrna Loy. With Bette Davis, he made no fewer than 11 Warner Brothers movies during the 1930s and '40s, including the classic "Jezebel" in 1938.

He married the actress Ann Sheridan and ran with the Hollywood Irish set, being a great friend of James Cagney. While he was famous as a debonair ladies man, his most Irish role was that of Colonel William Donovan in the 1940 Hal B. Wallis film "The Fighting 69th," which depicted the famous Irish regiment. The film also starred Cagney, Pat O'Brien, Alan Hale and Frank McHugh. My grandfather apparently got a great kick out of seeing George Nolan back in uniform, and claimed he "hadn't changed a bit."

The list of George Brent's films can be read in any cinema reference book, but it is