

Barry, Denis

by Anne-Marie McInerney

Barry, Denis (1883–1923), Irish Volunteer, commandant of the Cork No. 1 Brigade and trade unionist, was born on 13 July 1883, in Riverstick, Cullen, Co. Cork, the son of John Barry, farmer and Nora Barry (née Sullivan). Denis was born on the family farm, the second youngest of eight children (five sons and three daughters). The Barrys instilled in their children a love of the Irish language and history from an early age and Denis became a Gaelic culture enthusiast. He played for the Blackrock National Hurling Club and won four senior county hurling championships between 1910–13.

Barry attended Ballymartle National School but was unable to attend secondary school due to a lack of facilities in the area. He began work on the family farm after primary school. He moved to Cork city in 1903 and worked as a draper's apprentice with the firm O'Sullivan and Howard. He was an active member of the trade union movement in Cork from 1907 until his death, becoming a voluntary trade union official for the Irish Drapers' Assistants Benefit and Protective Association. In 1912, Barry became a member of Na Fianna Éireann and dedicated much of his time and finances to the Cork branch. He was also a member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. In 1914, he joined the Irish Volunteers in Cork city. His brothers Batt and Micheal were also involved in the movement.

In 1915, Denis left Cork to take up employment at Monster House drapers in Kilkenny. Once he arrived, Denis soon became actively involved with the Irish Volunteers in the city and he inevitably came to the attention of the authorities. The manoeuvres in Kilkenny were cancelled during the 1916 rising and on 3 May, Barry was arrested at work and brought to Kilkenny jail. He was transferred to Richmond Barracks six days later. Conditions in the barracks were particularly poor with prisoners sleeping on the floor, covered by horse blankets and receiving inadequate nutrition. On 13 May, Barry and a large number of republican prisoners were shipped via cattle boat for internment in the United Kingdom. Initially imprisoned in Wakefield, Barry was later transferred to Frongoch internment camp in Wales. While there, internees engaged in a series of military drills, Irish language classes and recreational sporting events. Barry was among some of the early releases from Frongoch and returned to his employment in August 1916.

Barry resumed his Volunteer activities in Kilkenny city. He played a major role in the success of W. T. Cosgrave's (qv) campaign in the by-election of 1917. In November 1918, Barry returned to Cork and was appointed to the staff of the Cork No. 1 Brigade reporting to Tomás MacCurtain (qv) and Terence MacSwiney (qv) as an intelligence officer. He was also appointed OC of the Irish republican police in the Cork brigade. The republican police, an unarmed force which operated under

the authority of Dáil Éireann, enforced the orders of the republican courts (set up by the republican government to supplant the British-governed bodies) in the country. In Cork, Denis ensured that the republican court orders relating to larceny, robbery, damage to property and assaults were carried through effectively. He facilitated the functioning of these courts and was responsible for recruiting men into the Irish republican police force. During the war of independence, Barry was also involved in a number of attacks on barracks with the Cork Volunteers and reported to Rory O'Connor (qv) regarding the outcome of these attacks. He risked his life 'on several occasions' during the burning of Cork city in December 1920 as he attempted to prevent looting (*Southern Star*, 26 Nov. 1966).

He continued to supervise the republican police in county Cork throughout the truce period but in December 1921, upon the signing of the Anglo-Irish treaty, Barry, like most of the Cork No. 1 Brigade, supported the anti-treaty side. He assisted the guarding of election ballots in Cork during the general election of June 1922. Following the outbreak of civil war, Barry was transferred to Wexford and appointed to the divisional staff of the 3rd Eastern Brigade of the IRA. He was arrested in October 1922 while in Cork, with other members of an irregular column in the course of fighting and with arms and ammunition in his possession. He was subsequently sent to Newbridge jail and then on to Newbridge internment camp.

As the civil war progressed, the number of republicans interned throughout the Free State rose to over 13,000. After the 'dump arms' announcement by the anti-treaty IRA in May 1923, the government made no immediate moves to release those interned. Later that year, thousands of republicans remained imprisoned and in October 1923, a mass hunger strike began in Mountjoy jail demanding prisoner releases. Internees in other jails and camps followed suit. Denis Barry joined the strike on 17 October but during the final week, his condition began to deteriorate. Fellow internee, Todd Andrews (qv), became so concerned that he approached the prison chaplain but was met with a 'blast of abuse against republicans in general' (Andrews, 323). On 17 November, Barry fell dangerously ill and was removed to the Curragh military hospital in an unconscious condition on 19 November. He died the following day on 20 November 1923.

The Free State government initially refused to return Barry's body to his family due to safety concerns. General Richard Mulcahy (qv) informed Dáil Éireann that 'when the circumstances are such that advantage cannot be taken of a funeral demonstration to prejudice the safety of the State or jeopardise further the lives of men who are still hunger striking in prison, the friends of Barry or of any other person who may die in this wretched hunger-strike ... will be granted to have the body of any such person transferred from the burial ground at present provided by the government to any burial ground his family or friends may wish' (*Dáil debates*, 21 Nov. 1923).

The Barry family took a high court action against the state and retrieved his remains for burial in late November. However, the controversy surrounding Barry's funeral

did not end there. Daniel Cohalan (qv), bishop of Cork, refused Barry a Christian burial in the diocese because of 'the course' he had taken during the civil war (*Ir. Independent*, 28 Nov. 1923). The bishop, who had supported the previous Cork hunger-striker Terence MacSwiney, also forbade priests in the diocese from officiating at the funeral mass. Barry's remains were therefore taken to the headquarters of Sinn Féin, at 56 Grand Parade, in Cork city. The funeral took place in the republican plot of St. Finbarr's cemetery and had one of the largest attendances in Cork at the time. Prayers at the graveside were recited by David Kent (qv) who prior to the burial, sprinkled the grave with holy water. Denis Barry was forty when he died. On 20 November 1966, a memorial plaque was erected to Barry on a bridge in his native Riverstick, Co. Cork. A local GAA pitch in the village of Riverstick is also named after him.

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Census of Ireland, 1901; Cork City and County Archives, Irish Volunteers Cork Corps membership list 1913–14; BMH, WS 473 (Denis Leahy); NLI, MS 11, 410/10/1; MS 11, 410/10/2; NAI Dept. Taoiseach, S.1369/10; *Kilkenny People*, 12 May 1916; *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 5, no. 12 (21 Nov. 1923); *Belfast Newsletter*, 22 Nov. 1923; *Daily Sheet*, 22 Nov. 1923; *Evening Herald*, 26 Nov. 1923; *Liberator* (Tralee), 27 Nov. 1923; *Ir. Independent*, 28 Nov. 1923; *Southern Star*, 12, 26 Nov. 1966; Sean O'Mahony, *Frongoch university of the revolution* (1987); C. S. (Todd) Andrews, *Dublin made me* (2001); Denis Barry, *The unknown commandant: the life and times of Denis Barry, 1883–1923* (2010)