

The Boland Republican dynasty

Our family story starts, not with the Bolands, but with the Kelly family. The grand matriarch of the Boland clan, Eliza Kelly, was a first cousin of Col. Thomas J. Kelly of Mountbellew, Galway – leader of the 1867 Fenian Rising.

At least according to family lore my great-grandfather, Gerald Boland, heard from his Mullin cousins.

So far, I haven't been able to confirm the relationship to the Colonel's family – or to the Mullin cousins. The lack of records makes things difficult, births weren't recorded until 1864 in Ireland.

What we do know is that Eliza married Patrick Boland in Manchester in 1845. Patrick is said to have come from Cams in Roscommon – a region seriously hit by An Gorta Mór. It's likely that one, if not both of them, were famine refugees.

They lived on the outskirts of the Angel Meadow slums in the city – a fertile recruiting ground for the Irish Republican Brotherhood that was established in 1858.

The IRB in Manchester left few records, for obvious reasons, so it's impossible to verify if Patrick Boland was a member. However, anecdotal evidence would strongly suggest that he was.

The family had seven children –

- Henry (born around 1849),
- Mary Ellen (born around 53),
- Kathleen or Catherine (born around 55),
- James (born 56 in Manchester),
- Patrick, better known as "Jack" (born 62 in Dublin),
- Elizabeth, better known as "Lilly" (born 64 in Dublin) and
- Teresa or "Teasie" (born 68 in Dublin).

Henry died in 1866 in Curraghboy in County Galway and is buried in the Mullin family grave in Esker Stevens Cemetery in Moylough, close to Mountbellew. He was accompanied by his father, at least, when he died.

While I can't find birth or baptism records for Henry, Mary Ellen or Catherine and just a baptism cert for Jack, the fact that Patrick or Eliza, or both, were back in Ireland in 1862, 64, 66, and 68 is interesting.

Pregnant women were far less likely to be searched when travelling – were they running guns for the IRB as many others did?

1866, when Henry died, was the original date of the Fenian Rising – did Patrick travel there with Henry to join in? Pat laid cobbles at the back of the Mullin and neighbouring farm in Moylough and according to local stories, they were laid by a "Rising man".

According to family lore, young Jim was involved in the liberation of Col. Kelly and Timothy Deasy from the prison van in 1867. 11-year-old Jim is reputed to have been one of the look-outs for the men who knocked the van, under the supervision of another Roscommon man – James Stritch.

Stritch worked with Patrick Boland on the Manchester tramlines. If the story is true, Patrick was probably involved in some way too, so high-tailing it to Dublin soon after would have made a lot of sense.

Jim definitely became involved in the IRB in the 1870s and quickly rose through the ranks to become a "centre" as local leaders were called. In 1881 or '82, he moved to Dublin, possibly sent there by Pat Nally of the IRB's Supreme Council. Jim became one of the leading figures in the movement in the city.

1882 was a busy year for Jim, not only did he marry fellow Irish-Mancunian Kate Woods, but he was also awarded the Royal Humane Society's medal in the same year for 'jumping off the Metal Bridge' to save a life.

He was implicated in the activities of the IRB Vigilance Committee, who killed an informer and were involved in the Battle of Abbey Street in which a policeman was shot.

He was connected by the police to the Invincibles who assassinated the permanent Under Secretary Thomas Henry Burke and the new Chief Secretary for Ireland, Lord Frederick Cavendish.

Things obviously got hot for Jim in January 1883 when William Lamie turned informer and named him as not only a member of the Vigilance Committee, but as a member of the more senior Dublin Directory of the IRB.

Jim avoided arrest and made it to the US with Kate. Kate's brother James Woods had emigrated there around a decade earlier and married. The couple stayed very close to where James lived, so they were likely in contact.

While there, Jim found work and mixed in Republican circles, getting to know John Devoy well. He likely also met Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa and others.

The couple's first child Ellen Maria was born in New York in 1884. It is possible that Jim travelled back to Ireland surreptitiously as he may have been at the Hayes Hotel the same year when the GAA was founded.

While they were away, Jim's sister Kathleen married a wealthy Welshman in London, apparently without his family knowing. That ended badly, when Thomas Wynne-Eyton died in 1899 having bankrupted his family. Kathleen lived the rest of her life as a widow dependent on a family who resented her.

In 1885, as Jim and Kate were travelling back to Dublin, Gerald was born en route in Manchester.

As they returned to Dublin, Jim's eldest sister Mary Ellen was travelling to the States – maybe to the place her brother had vacated. Mary Ellen had left the family in the 1870s and married Dubliner John Levins in 1873, using the name Mary Ann Mullin. The birth of their first child a month after the wedding might explain the use of a fake name.

They lived in Salford and had five children, but only two survived childhood. The family emigrated to the US where John and their son William fought in the Spanish-American War.

John was injured and died in 1904. William went on to live a long life as a soldier, reaching the rank of Lt. Col.. He had at least two children, from whom there are a number of living descendants.

Once Jim and Kate returned to Dublin, and for the rest of his life, he was closely watched by the police who, in 1886 called him "a very clever and dangerous fellow and seems to be as active now as ever." However, he was never arrested for his political activity.

Publicly, he worked mainly on organising Republican commemorative events such as that for the Manchester Martyrs, as well as funerals for his friend Pat Nally and Charles Steward Parnell.

Following the split in the Parliamentary Party in 1890, Jim became a strong backer of Parnell, despite his disdain for parliament. He was involved in the invasion of the United Ireland newspaper with Parnell – during which he was hit in the head, probably by a piece of furniture in the melee. He was also hit in the head protecting Parnell before his last trip to Wicklow.

He was a leading figure in the Paviors' Society, an early trade union in Dublin, and a strong supporter of the Dublin Council of Trade Unions. He worked as a pavior in Manchester with his father and then in Dublin. He was promoted to supervisor working on Corporation road works, including the paving of Smithfield, where he was spokesperson for a strike in 1894.

He also became very active in the GAA and was elected President of the Dublin Central Committee in 1892.

He organised the Nally Branch of the GAA, named in honour of Pat Nally, which led to his only arrest. In 1892, he was brought before the courts charged with keeping drink for the purposes of sale without a license.

In court, he was able to show that, in fact, the venue was the new premises of the Nally Branch and that the bar was attached to the club. The case was dismissed.

The Nally Branch was notorious with the police who regarded it as a gang of militant Republicans and unrepentant former Invincibles.

In less public activity, he and his brother Jack were suspected of, though never caught, smuggling guns from England.

Jack had become active in the IRB and, in 1886, was named as "paid travelling organiser" at the meeting of the Supreme Council. Unfortunately General F. F. Millen of Clan na Gael – a spy for the British secret service – also attended.

Some years later, Jack became the IRB's envoy to Clan na Gael in the US (taking advantage of his import/export business). He became embroiled in the factional fighting in the US movement that reached its climax with the Dr Cronin murder trial in 1889 and was beset by allegations of collusion with British spies. The irascible John Devoy described Jack as "no good".

Given how infiltrated the US movement was with spies, it's likely that the allegations were disinformation designed to blacken his name. Michael Boland (no relation), one of Triangle, leaders of one Clan na Gael faction, has been named as a spy by a number of historians. Since the mid-80s, American-born Clan na Gael members sometimes resented IRB people who tried to tell them what to do.

Their father Patrick died sometime around the end of the 1880s, because Eliza and Lilly (and probably Teasy) appear to have moved to Dublin where Eliza died in 1890 – her death cert says she was a widow. Lilly was listed the witness.

Jim and Kate's family grew with the birth of Harry in 1887, Kathleen in 1889 and Ned in 1893.

In June 1894, Jim accompanied Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa on his tour around Ireland. In July, he became a member of the IRB's Supreme Council.

Less than a year later, he fell ill with a serious brain disorder, most likely caused by the head injuries a few years earlier. While in hospital, he was visited by numerous comrades, including John MacBride before he travelled to fight in the Boer War.

Jim failed to recover and died on 11 March. Around 1,500 mourners on foot followed his open hearse at his funeral.

The group included three members of parliament, eight city councillors and prominent Nationalists, including Arthur Griffith, James Bermingham and Fred Allan.

Following his death, two funds were raised to save his wife and young family from destitution. Enough money was raised to acquire a tobacconists business for Kate Boland.

Only a few months later, in November, Jack died of Enteric fever (most likely Typhoid) in Liverpool. He had been engaged to be married to Bébé, Pat Nally's sister.

Lily married a German widower, August Sohl, in 1896 and they had five children before he ran off. There are living descendants of her children as well.

As the Bolands tried to rebuild their life after Jim's death, they were struck by further tragedy when Nellie died in 1898. Harry went to live with the Tynan family for a few years, but Kate obviously also needed the support of her family as, in the 1901 census, 14-year-old Harry is with his widowed aunt Annie Devlin, Kate's sister, and her daughter.

Harry was back in Dublin in 1904 when he and Gerald became the youngest ever members of the IRB in honour of their father. They were sworn in by Jim's old friend James Stritch.

Kate herself had strong Republican roots, James Woods, an ancestor of hers, had made pikes in 1798 and survived a flogging. Her shop was well known in Republican and nationalist circles as she stocked the range of Republican and nationalist newspapers alongside her pipes, cigarettes and tobacco.

She raised her family very much in the Republican tradition, which is clear in the 1911 census. The Boland, Ua Beolain, family, in an act of civil disobedience, completed the form as Gaeilge – as did two other families who would soon become linked to the Bolands – the Keatings, Ua Céinn, and the Whelans, Ua Faoiláin. Conradh na Gaeilge was having an impact.

The GAA was also a large part of the family's lives, particularly Harry's as he became Dublin County Committee chairman, like his father, in 1904.

Harry pioneered using the GAA as a training ground for what would become the Volunteers as his father had predicted could happen.

All three boys immediately became involved in the Volunteers when they were formed in 1913. Harry and Gerald both became active in training and drilling, particularly in the new Forester's Hall, built by James Stritch. Kathleen didn't get involved for a few more years – we'll hear more about her activities later.

Involvement in the movement had perhaps unanticipated results when Gerald met Cumann na mBan member Annie Keating. They were married in 1915 on the same day and in the same Church, St Kevin's as her sister Margaret married Patrick Whelan.

Annie retired from the Cumann when she became pregnant with her first son, Enda, who was born in June 1916 when Gerald was detained in Knutsford Jail.

All three Boland brothers had fought in the Easter Rising. Gerald was in Jacob's the entire time fighting under Tomás MacDonagh and his father's old friend John MacBride. Harry and Ned had a more active Rising, with Ned fighting in the Imperial Hotel, with Harry ultimately called to the Metropole and then the GPO where he stayed until the retreat down Moore Street that ended in surrender.

Harry and Gerald were arrested and imprisoned. Ned told police he'd been at the races and escaped arrest. Gerald started in Knutsford and was later sent to Frongoch along with Michael Collins and many others.

Harry faced a court-martial for taking a British soldier hostage and imprisoned in Dartmoor, along with Eamon DeValera and Con O'Donovan, fellow GAA sportsman and future brother-in-law. He was sent to Maidstone Prison when the authorities decided to split up the prisoners. Gerald was released early in 1918 with the mass of the prisoners, Harry had to wait a few more months.

Gerald and Annie's second son, Kevin, was born in 1917. Gerald became involved in reorganising and training the Volunteers. He was arrested in May 1918 for illegal drilling and imprisoned again, this time in Belfast, for most of the rest of the year.

When De Valera and other leaders was arrested for the bogus "German Plot" in 1918, Harry became a member of the IRB Supreme Council like his father. He was soon elected Chairman. He also became secretary of Sinn Féin who were preparing for the election. He was elected to the Dáil representing Roscommon, his grandfather's home county.

Harry began to conspired with his then friend Michael Collins to rescue De Valera from prison, which they successfully did (despite some mishaps) in February 1919. While in Manchester before and after the jailbreak, they stayed with Harry's aunt Lily.

De Valera then decided to tour America to raise funds for the Dáil and that Harry should come with him. Follow in his uncle's footsteps, Harry became the official envoy to the US of both the Dáil and the IRB.

Gerard and Ned were active with the IRA during the Irish War of Independence. Gerard became a Commandant of the Dublin Brigade, while Ned appears to have gone back to sea to bring home guns and ammo that was urgently needed for the Army. He met Harry in the US in 1919.

Family life continued for Gerald and Annie with the birth of their first two daughters, Eileen and Máire in 1920 and '22 respectively. De Valera returned at the end of 1920 for the last months of the war of independence, but Harry remained in the US until August 1921 and returned after the Truce was declared in July. He was sent back to America in October where he remained until

We'll hear later about the Treaty negotiations and Harry's fight with his friend Collins. And, if you don't already know the story of the Russian jewels, look it up!

When the Civil War broke out, the three Boland brothers met for the last time in Blessington in early July 1922. Gerald was captured and imprisoned until 1924.

Harry evaded capture and was even able to be best man at Con O'Donovan's wedding on 12 July. Less than a month later, he was dead at the hands of the Free State forces.

Gerald wasn't even allowed out to attend Harry's funeral in August. Ned was also captured at some point in the conflict and both brothers took part in the hunger strike. Gerald was elected to the Roscommon Dáil seat while still in prison. Even after his release, he refused to take his seat in line with Sinn Féin's continuing abstentionism.

Ned was released from prison first, being less senior in the IRA than Gerald, and decided it was best to leave the country and travel to the US. Sadly, he contracted TB and died in April 1928. He is buried in a grave purchased by Clan na Gael in Calvary Cemetery in Queens, New York.

In 1923, Kathleen married Seán O'Donovan, brother of Con O'Donovan, and they started their family with son Harry in 1925.

Two more children followed for Gerald and Annie, another Harry in 1925 and Ciarán in 1927.

By this time, Gerald was one of the TDs tiring of abstaining from the Dáil. When a motion to the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis to end the policy failed, Gerald became one of the founders of Fianna Fáil who took their seats in 1927. Their final child, Nuala, was born in 1930.

Gerald first became a government minister in 1933, taking charge of Posts and Telegraphs and then Lands.

In 1937, he had one of the angriest responses to the first draft of the Constitution and was successful in persuading De Valera to redraft to tone down the Catholic aspects. The fact that he had been excommunicated meant he resented the Church hierarchy dictating terms to the government.

He became Minister for Justice in 1939 just in time for the remnants of the IRA, who had been banned since 1935, to raid the Dublin Magazine Fort and make off over a million rounds of ammunition. Gerald's response was to rush the Emergency Powers Bill through parliament to reinstate internment, Military Tribunal and executions for IRA members.

Over the next few years, he had to contend with the IRA collaborating with Nazi Germany, which led to a stream of Nazi spies arriving in Ireland.

The IRA also carried out attacks in Britain to try and force an invasion so German would invade, as well as a number of killings, including three Gardaí in 1940. Two IRA men were executed for killing a Garda and the IRA leadership was interned in the Curragh.

Gerald's department was less than welcoming for refugees from the Holocaust, officially fearing a rise in anti-Semitism in Ireland. However, a number of officials in the Justice department were later exposed as anti-Semites who misrepresented information to the Minister.

Out of government in 1948, he retook his role as Minister for Justice from 1951 until 1954, making him the longest serving Minister for Justice so far in the Republic. Another period out of government ended in 1957, but Gerald was replaced in the cabinet by his son Kevin as Seán Lemass sought to modernise the party. Gerald moved to the Seanad.

After two unsuccessful electoral attempts, Kevin was elected and appointed Minister for Defence in 1957 on his first day in the Dáil. He moved to Social Welfare from 61 to 66 and Local Government from 66 until 70 (with Social Welfare as well for the last year).

He resigned from government in protest at the treatment of his colleagues Haughey and Blaney during the Arms Trial. Gerald resigned his position as vice-president of the party. Kevin was expelled from the party some months later for continuing to criticise Taoiseach Jack Lynch.

He tried to make his comeback by disrupting the Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis in 1971. He stormed a podium, interrupted Patrick Hillery's speech, shouting to the crowd "Come on up and put me down."

His supporters started shouting "We want Boland." Hillery replied "If you want a fight you can have it...You can have Boland, but you can't have Fianna Fáil," and Kevin was carried out of the hall.

An attempt to relaunch his political career with Aontacht Éireann floundered and the era of Bolands at the centre of Irish politics ended.

The Bolands learned what many revolutionaries before and since have learned – the ideals of the revolution too often become lost when building a new state.

Jim, Harry and Gerald were not just nationalists and Republicans, they were also trade unionists and socialists. So much so that Gerald was nicknamed Trotsky during the War of Independence and Harry was accused of being too close to the Labour Party.

Gerald, the accidental politician who'd lost two brothers due to the conflict, found, once in government, that the ideals he had fought for in 1916 were long gone. The defeat of the Irregulars by the counter-revolutionary Free State, partition and the true winner of the Civil War – the Catholic Church hierarchy who controlled much of Irish society – meant that socialism had become a dirty word.

While many criticise the De Valera government for allowing the Church too much control, the argument over the Constitution shows that there was opposition to their power.

Ironically, it was Fianna Fáil's electoral opponents, the 1948 coalition government who showed what happened when a government tried to implement social policies opposed by the Church.

The mother and child scheme, an extremely watered down version of the UK's NHS, was deemed to be "socialised medicine" "contrary to Catholic moral teaching" and condemned, bringing down the government.

Kevin tried to make a change by supporting building new homes for the people of the crumbling inner cities. Ballymun is just one example of how what was supposed to be a positive social development became a dumping ground for the working class.

The buildings were completed and filled, but none of the promised amenities were built, as corruption spread in Dublin's local government. Instead, Ballymun became a symbol of social disintegration until the towers were demolished between 2004 and 2015.

While the ideal of reunification remained a priority on paper for Fianna Fáil, as Kevin found in 1970, when the start of the Troubles demanded action from the Irish government, it ended in lies and farcical court proceedings.

We can look at another branch of the family to see where social change began to be possible – Dónal Barrington's legal career.

Maybe building a new nation takes more than a revolution, maybe it takes generations not just of politicians, but of social and legal activists who can force governments to act. And maybe some day, Ireland will become a Republic that truly, as 1916 Proclamation put it:

"[...] guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past."