**Identity Statement**

**Reference Code:** **IE/WXCA/P 482**

**Title:** Personal autograph book/diary of Seán Sinnott maintained during his internment in Spike Island internment camp, Cork

**Dates:** 1921-22

**Level of description:** Item

**Extent:**  38pp

**Context**

**Creator:** Seán Sinnott with contributions from his fellow prisoners

**Archival History**

A digital copy of this book was deposited in Wexford County Archive by Seán Sinnott’s grand-daughter, Eithne Agar in September 2019 by kind permission of the estate of Oliver Sinnott, Casement Terrace, Wexford

**Scope and Content**

Digital copy of a part diary, part autograph book (and later order book) maintained by Seán Sinnott during his incarceration in Spike Island internment camp, Cork during 1921 (the entries date from 8 July 1921 up to 22 February 1922).

As the War of Independence progressed, and in an attempt to restore some order in an increasingly volatile country, martial law was declared in counties Cork, Kerry, Tipperary and Limerick in early December 1920. Cork in particular was a hotbed of reprisals which saw the burning of parts of the city centre on 11 December 1920. Martial law was extended to counties Wexford, Waterford, Kilkenny and Clare in January 1921. Raids, searches and arrests by Crown forces were features of everyday life whereby suspected rebels could be held without trial, and places of detention like Spike Island were made available to house the considerable increase in the numbers of those arrested and interned. Spike Island was opened as a prison for Irish republican prisoners and internees in February 1921 [www.johncrottyauthor.com/escape-from-spike-island-april1921/](http://www.johncrottyauthor.com/escape-from-spike-island-april1921/)

A total of 39 signatures and addresses are recorded in the autograph book, representing men from counties Cork, Kilkenny, Wexford, Waterford, Limerick, Tipperary and Kerry (21 from Cork, 5 from Wexford, 7 from Waterford, 2 from Kilkenny, 2 from Tipperary, 1 from Kerry and 1 from Limerick). Fellow County Wexford signatories in the autograph book include John Cloke, Rosslare (Commanding Officer, 4th Battalion, Wexford Brigade in 1917); James J. Lacey, Ballycarney, Ferns; James Harper, Oylegate, Enniscorthy; Pierce Byrne, Charlotte St, Wexford; and James O’Brien, St John’s, Enniscorthy. Some of the contributions are accompanied by a verse, prayer or salutation.

The book includes a written account by Patrick Buckley from Coolmohan, Kilworth, Co. Cork, detailing the timeline of his arrests from 30 January 1920, his participation in subsequent hunger strikes in Wormwood Scrubs prison, his re-arrest in late April 1921 and his eventual transfer to Spike Island convict prison on 30 June 1921 ‘*and God only knows where else’*. At the time of his arrest in April, he was serving with Glanworth Battalion, Cork 2 Brigade, having previously served as Captain of Ballyduff Company, 2nd Battalion, 2 Waterford Brigade. Part of his narrative is written in prose/poetry – ‘*I have been through jails and Prisons from the year 1916, But hopeful thoughts have made me feel this will be finally. I have seen the dawn a breaking, our sacred soil shall be that glorious Land. Our price is paid [ever] destined to be free*’.

The signing of the Truce on 11 July 1921 elicited hopes of an early release for the prisoners, but months later, this hadn’t materialised, and many prisoners reconvened efforts to escape. There had been an earlier escape from Spike Island on 29 April 1921 in which three prominent republicans – Tom Malone aka Sean Forde, Cornelius Twomey and Sean MacSwiney, Terence’s brother – had escaped.

Seán Sinnott (who himself was interned on Spike Island under martial law order dated 30 June 1921) provides a written account on the subsequent escape from Spike Island by seven fellow prisoners on 10 November 1921 naming Buckley as one of seven men alongside Bill Quirke, [Tom Crofts otherwise known as Tom Flavin], Henry O’Mahony, Maurice (Moss) Twomey, Paddy Buckley, Dick Barrett and Jack Eddy.

An entry in the volume in Seán’s hand records the number of men from each county that were on hunger strike in Spike Island on 30 August 1921 – of the 312 men, County Cork represented the most men at 186, with the second highest number of men hailing from County Wexford at 31. The hunger strike, which lasted four days, was undertaken for the unconditional release of those who were interned and imprisoned in the camp.

A short narrative written by Seán details the ‘break up’ in the camp on 16 October 1921, following which two internees, Bill Quirke and Henry O’Mahony were arrested, with a hunger strike declared for their release the following day (Monday) which was successful. This was in response to the refusal of the prison authorities to grant prisoner status to the men. ‘Wrecking again commenced at 9 o’clock same morning’. It resulted in all prisoners, with the exception of hospital patients being removed to the dry moat, on the perimeter of the camp, where the hunger strike continued ‘as Prisoners were put on bread and water’. ‘Hot tea brought to moat gate’ at 8am on the Wednesday morning was refused ‘till full ration was sent. Full ration at 9 o’clock am and the prisoners were removed to the huts that evening where they slept on floors without blankets till Friday night’. By 25 October, the prisoners were ordered back to ‘normal conditions’ pending an enquiry.

Spike Island camp closed in mid-November 1921. On the night of 16 November, the last republican prisoners were moved from there to Kilkenny Gaol. On 18 November, all the internees (including Seán Sinnott) were conveyed to Cobh where they boarded a train for the night journey to Maryborough (Portlaoise) Prison. All the Spike internees, including Seán Sinnott, were released from Maryborough Prison on 8 December 1921, following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The republican prisoners from Spike and from across the country were released following the ratification of the Treaty in January 1922.

The remaining pages of the autograph book are given over to orders and costings for coffins (timber, mountings, finish, lined/un-lined) and for the manufacture of doors, windows, stairs – presumably in connection with Seán’s employment in J.J. Stafford’s as a carpenter/joiner.

References to Lar Radford are documented towards the close of the volume – subsequent to the revolutionary period, Seán and Lar were partners in the builders’ contracting firm Sinnott and Radford in Wexford. Radford was also a joiner and had active service during the 1916-21 period, with Seán Sinnott as his Officer Commanding. He had been involved in the raid on Pierce’s Foundry in 1920 and was subsequently interned along with Sinnott in various places of detention in Wexford, Waterford and Cork before being interned on Spike Island and in Maryborough Prison before his release on 8 December 1921.

**Biographical History**

Seán Sinnott was born on 3 March 1883 at Old Pound, Wexford town to Stephen Sinnott and Ellen Sinnott (née Brady). He was employed as a carpenter/joiner with Stafford’s joinery works from c. 1908. He married Eileen Parle, a schoolteacher in Clonroche on 15 February 1915 in Wexford, and they lived at 7 Grattan Terrace in the town. Eileen was a stalwart in the nationalist cause and conducted Gaelic classes in Clonroche, and the couple was well known in Gaelic circles across the county.

A member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) since 1906, Seán joined the Irish Volunteers in Wexford in 1914 at the age of 31. Following John Redmond’s speech at Woodenbridge in September 1914 urging Irishmen to join the British army and support the war effort, a substantial number of men subsequently joined the Redmondite Volunteers. While Seán, in his capacity as Commander of the Wexford Battalion was prepared to participate in the official welcome demonstration for Redmond in Wexford town on 4 October that year, it was on the stipulation that the Volunteer review ‘should not be used to invite recruits for foreign service in the British Army’ (*The People*, 10 October 1914, p 6). When he received an ultimatum from the battalion members to martial the Volunteers irrespective of his political views, he refused, and a battalion commander was appointed in his place.

In the run up to Easter week 1916, Seán was involved in drilling and in procuring steel for the manufacture of pikes. ‘*We could not do very much. We were in a hostile town*’ (Sworn statement made by John Sinnott before Advisory Committee, 1 March 1937). In his claim for a service pension, he stated that he had mobilised a number of Volunteers at Skeeter Park, outside Wexford who were disbanded following the countermanding order from Eoin McNeill. Another attempt was made to mobilise them in Skeeter Park on receipt of news from Bob Brennan that Enniscorthy had taken up arms. However, only a handful of men turned up at the Park and Seán disbanded them as it would have been futile to offer resistance given such a small number. Although he had made active attempts to mobilise the men in Wexford town during Easter Week 1916, it was unsuccessful.

Seán was arrested on Easter Monday (1 May) 1916 and brought to Wexford Military Barracks and on to Waterford Jail before being sent to Richmond Barracks. He was subsequently transported to Stafford and to Wandsworth prisons before being interned in Frongoch internment camp, North Wales. He was released from Frongoch in October 1916.

Seán had confirmed military service with the Irish Volunteers/IRA from 1 April 1917 up until the Truce on 11 July 1921. 1917 was spent re-organising the Volunteers until he and Bob Brennan (a journalist with *The Echo* newspaper) were arrested on 7 November 1917 along with Pierce Byrne, miller under the Defence of the Realm Act for organising a parade ordered by General HQ. According to reports in the local newspapers, the prisoners were accorded a popular ovation with the subsequent public parade by the Wexford Corps in protest at their arrests that evening (*The Free Press*, 10 November 1917). The three prisoners were taken to Cork to await trial by court-martial. They were released on 21 November 1917 after having gone on hunger strike for four days.

In his sworn statement before the advisory committee in his claim for a military service pension, Seán stated that his rank was Battalion Adjutant, 4th Battalion, South Wexford Brigade under Comdt. James Ryan, which he had held since 1918.

At 25 years of age, Seán had stood as a Sinn Féin candidate in the 1909 municipal elections for the Selskar Ward, Wexford town, but was unsuccessful. His later foray into local politics, however, saw him elected as a member of Wexford County Council (for the Wexford area) in the local elections in June 1920.

During the War of Independence, Seán was involved in raids on private homes for arms and was in charge of c. 30 men in a raid on Pierce’s Foundry for shells. His arrest on 10 October 1920 followed a raid on his home and the discovery of ‘unlawful documents’ which led to his being held in Cork Jail. He was tried at the district court martial in Cork on 21 October 1920 for possession of a document outlining details of activities of D Company for the previous few months including attacks on Cullenstown coastguard station, on members of the RIC at Rosslare, destruction of Killinick RIC barracks and a raid on Rosslare coastguard station (source: Military Service Pensions Collections). His letter of resignation which was submitted to the county council by his brother S. A. Sinnott, was read at the county council meeting on 7 December 1920 conveying his intention of resigning his seat for the six months of his imprisonment (Wexford County Council minute book, WXCC/1/8, p 166). He was replaced at the next council meeting by Laurence Radford, Old Pound, Wexford – who himself was replaced by Thomas Walsh, High Street, Wexford in early 1921 as he was also under arrest.

He was sentenced to imprisonment with hard labour for six months and transferred to Brixton Jail and Wormwood Scrubs until his release on 24 April 1921 following a hunger strike.

Seán was re-arrested three days later, on 27 April 1921 and held in the military barracks in Wexford for a fortnight until his transfer to Waterford Jail. He subsequently spent periods of detention in Kilworth camp, Co. Cork and in Cork Jail before a martial law order dated 30 June 1921 interned him on Spike Island.

Of the Truce, Seán remarked ‘Because there was not a man in that jail but thought that it was all right, until we heard about Dev objecting. If we had known, we would have laid down and made them carry us from the station to the prison’. (Seán Sinnott’s reminiscences – an interview with Séamas S. de Vál in *The Past: the organ of the Ui Cinsealaigh Historical Society*, No. 32 (2016), p 103).

In a letter to the referee (20 January 1942) for a pension, Seán stated that his house was constantly raided for a period of six years ‘with great hardship to my wife and family’. He received a military pension for his service with the Irish Volunteers/IRA for the service periods between 1 April 1917 and 11 July 1921. Although he had been active during 1916 and up to the end of March 1917, his claim for active service during this period was unsuccessful.

In 1940, Sean joined the LDF in Wexford town and worked in the capacity of District Commander for a time.

Known as ‘the pioneer of the Volunteer movement in Wexford town’, Seán Sinnott died on 30 November 1970. In his obituary published in *The People* newspaper (28 November 1970), he was referred to as a ‘notable tenor’ who sang with the Wexford Parish Choir and the Franciscan Church Choir (his six sons were also gifted tenors). The oration at his funeral was delivered by his former comrade, Liam Walsh of Parnell Street, Wexford who observed that Seán belonged to an organisation ‘that for comradeship, discipline and moral character would never be surpassed’.

Seán Sinnott did not participate in the Civil War.