**Identity Statement**

**Reference Code:** **IE/WXCA/P 484**

**Title:** Personal autograph book of Seán Sinnott maintained by him during his incarceration in Cork Jail

**Dates:** 1917

**Level of description:** Item

**Extent:**  22pp

**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 July 2021 by kind permission of the estate of Oliver Sinnott, Casement Terrace, Wexford

**Scope and Content**

An autograph book maintained by Seán Sinnott during his brief incarceration in Cork Jail in November 1917 (entries cover the period 14-18 November 1917), and inscribed on the inside cover in his hand, ‘The Autographs in this book were written before the Hunger Strike in 1917 and collected by the undersigned, Seán Ó Sionóid’.

There are a total of 29 signatures in the volume represented by men from counties Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Clare, Tipperary, Kilkenny and Wexford. The signatures of at least three high profile republican figures are featured, for whom Seán Sinnott has retrospectively updated their ‘status’ after their deaths.

Tomás MacCurtain from Mourne Abbey, Co. Cork was a Sinn Féin politician who had been actively engaged in the 1916 Rising and was Brigadier of No. 1 Cork in 1919. He was elected in the January 1920 local elections as Sinn Féin councillor for the North-West Ward No. 3 of Cork, and as Mayor of Cork until he was shot dead on 20 March 1920 by members of the RIC.

Another contributor to the autograph book was Terence MacSwiney from North Main Street, Cork who was active with the Irish Volunteers from their establishment in late 1913. He took part in 1916 and was imprisoned afterwards in Reading Gaol and Wakefield Prison under the Defence of the Realm Act. Elected in the 1918 general election as a member for mid Cork, he took up his seat in the first Dáil Éireann. He was elected Lord Mayor of Cork in place of his friend Tomás Mac Curtain in late March 1920. On 12 August that year, he was arrested in Cork for possession of seditious documents and sentenced to two years’ imprisonment at Brixton Prison. He had joined the prisoners in Cork who had started the 1920 Cork hunger strike the previous day and continued the strike on his transfer to Brixton Prison, but succumbed on 2 October 1920 after just over 10 weeks without food and water.

The signature of Seoirse Mac Flannchada (George Clancy), a teacher at Clongowes Wood College is recorded. Clancy enlisted with the Irish Volunteers in 1913 and took part in the 1916 Rising after which he was arrested and imprisoned in Cork. However, he was released before his trial after having initiated a hunger strike. He was elected Sinn Féin Mayor of Limerick in 1921 but was shot dead by Auxiliaries on 6 March 1921.

The only prisoner from County Wexford recorded in the autograph book is Riobáird Ó Braonáin (Robert Brennan), Commandant of the Wexford Battalion, IRA and long-time friend and revolutionary of Seán Sinnott. In his contribution, Brennan pens a verse inspired by the strongly nationalistic play *Caitlín Ní Houlihan* by WB Yeats and Lady Gregory which was based on the 1798 rebellion and blood sacrifice. Brennan joined *The Echo* newspaper firm in Enniscorthy in 1909 as a reporter. A founding member of the Gaelic League in Wexford, he was one of the original members of the IRB in the town (along with Seán Sinnott). One of the leaders in the 1916 Rising in Enniscorthy, his initial death sentence on the surrender was commuted to penal servitude and he was interned in Dartmoor, Lewes and Pankhurst prisons. On his release in June 1917, he returned to his post in *The Echo* and with the reorganisation of the Irish Volunteers.

The greater part of 1917 was spent re-organising the Volunteers in Wexford town until Seán and Bob Brennan were arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act on 7 November 1917 (along with Pierce Byrne, miller) for organising a parade in the town and for wearing military uniforms and drilling. 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 Jail to await trial by court-martial. They were released on 21 November 1917 after having gone on hunger strike for four days. Seán recalled having spent three days recovering in Terence McSwiney’s house after his release following which he returned home to Wexford.

In Seán’s reminiscences, he recalls having been approached by Sergeant Collopy shortly after his arrest in Wexford town and prior to his transfer to Cork Jail – both men held a mutual respect for each other. Collopy offered to take a pocket-book from Seán for safekeeping and to pass same on to Seán’s wife as the book would have been apprehended after Seán was searched. ‘*I had things in the pocket-book that I didn’t want him to see, or anyone to see – they were incriminating*’ (*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 98).

**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.

He had confirmed military service with the Irish Volunteers/IRA from 1 April 1917 up until the Truce on 11 July 1921. Having been arrested on 7 November 1917 with Bob Brennan and Pierce Byrne under the Defence of the Realm Act for organising a parade ordered by General HQ, they 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.