

Labour lives, no. 14

Thomas Kain, 1886 - 1948

Born in Glasgow on 5 June 1886, Thomas Kain is remembered for his role in the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) in 1916 and for his work as a portrait and banner painter. Much of his personal life is obscure. The son of a British Army tailor who was born in Hamburg, Germany, Thomas attended the Royal Hibernian Military School in Dublin.¹ In the 1911 census, when he was 24 years of age, he was returned as married for one year and childless, but his wife was not among his household at 26 Charlemont Street, Dublin. His Dublin-born mother Catherine Kain, aged 50, was there however, as was his brother Christopher, aged 19. By occupation Thomas Kain was then a 'carpet fitter', by religion a Roman Catholic, and he spoke Irish and English.² His mother died in 1924 and his brother in 1935. Both are buried in Mount Jerome in an unmarked grave.

A member of the ICA, Kain was a committed socialist and evidently a confidant of James Connolly. According to Frank Robbins's memoir of the ICA: 'All men received their instructions from the Chief Mobilisation Officer of the Army, Lieutenant Thomas Kain, all his instructions coming direct from James Connolly or Michael Mallin.'³ Years later, Kain wrote to the *Voice of Labour* dealing with the background to ICA participation in the 1916 Rising. At Christmas 1914, he recounted that Connolly alerted him to plans for an insurrection in March 1915, but he heard no more about it. On a later occasion, when ICA members had gone to watch manoeuvres of the Irish Volunteers rather than participating in the drilling scheduled for their own force, Kain recorded that 'Connolly was wild.'⁴ It was Kain's impression that Connolly fought not with a view to 'immediately attaining a Republic', but rather to bring about a 'resurrection of that revolutionary thought and action in Ireland which, he calculated, would lead ultimately to the emancipation of the Irish Working Class.'⁵

As second-in-command to Sean Connolly (who was shot and killed during the assault on the Castle by a rooftop sniper), Kain led the forces that captured and occupied the guardroom of Dublin Castle on Easter Monday. Access was facilitated by Kain's acquiring a key to City Hall, located at the gateway to Dublin Castle. After holding the guardroom for some hours, the members of the section retired to a cellar under Lahiff's shop further up Castle Street where they held out for several days. Kain had responsibility for keeping the record of the names and secret numbers issued to each Citizen Army recruit, and Robbins recounted that in 1927, Kain and himself retrieved the ICA register from the cellar where Kain had hidden it in 1916. Thomas Kain was listed as No. 3.⁶

After the surrender, Kain was detained at Richmond Barracks and, on 9 May 1916, lodged in Wandsworth Detention Barracks in London. On his release he resumed active service with the rank of Commandant.⁷

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At the age of 32 in 1919, Kain enrolled as a student in the Metropolitan School of Art (later the National College of Art and Design). His address then was 15 Old Camden Street.⁸ In the 1920s, he contributed cartoons to the *Voice of Labour*, and advertised in the same paper thus: 'Banners and Flags Painted; Portraits in Oils; Illuminated Addresses (Special Terms to Trade Union Branches).'⁹ Also in the 1920s, he was a member of the Radical Club, a loose organisation of artists and writers which included luminaries such as Liam O'Flaherty, F.R. Higgins, Harry Kernoff, Sean Keating, Sean Sullivan, Frank O'Connor, Maurice McGonigal and Cecil Salkeld.¹⁰

In an edition of *Who's Who in Art* he described himself also as a lacquer worker and recorded that he won first prize medals for painted furniture at the Royal Dublin Society and at the Aonach Tailteann.¹¹ In 1926, in an exhibition at the Daniel Egan gallery, St Stephens Green, featuring modern art from Paris, Thomas Kain was represented by two paintings.¹² He showed four works at the Royal Hibernian Academy, including in 1925 a portrait of James Connolly painted from a photograph. This painting was lent by the Irish Transport & General Workers Union (ITGWU) for the Golden Jubilee of the Easter Rising exhibition at the National Gallery of Ireland in 1966 and is now in Liberty Hall.¹³ Other portraits by Kain in Liberty Hall include Tom Foran, 1926, and Tom Kennedy, 1942. Another ITGWU luminary, William O'Brien, also sat for him, as did Thomas Nagle, a Cork Labour TD, and Ina Connolly Heron, James Connolly's daughter. His portrait of Constance Markievicz, dated 26 July 1925, was presented to the Irish Labour History Society (ILHS) by his grand-niece Nuala Gilsenan in 2008 and is currently on loan to the Technical, Electrical & Engineering Union for display in the Markievicz Executive Room of their head office.¹⁴

In response to a query from Theo Snoddy, Senator Fintan Kennedy then ITGWU President wrote of Kain and his brother Christopher:

Both of them were Bohemian in their approach to life and socialistic in their politics They were regarded as great characters in the Dublin in the 1920s. I well remember visiting their studio as they were pleased to call it when my father was sitting for his portrait. Actually I always had to stay outside as the studio was so cluttered up with paraphernalia that only two people could occupy it at the same time and there were pieces of carpet and linoleum everywhere, Tom being a carpet layer by trade...¹⁵

As a banner painter Kain operated to a high standard. In 1920 he executed the banner of the carters Section of No 1 Branch of the ITGWU Dublin (2.5 metres by 1.9 metres), which is now in the ILHS Museum in Beggar's Bush. According to Belinda Loftus, this was a 'very fine piece of painting,' in which the back is very apt and well-executed and the scroll work is exquisite.¹⁶ In 1930 he was responsible for the shield-shaped banner for the Electrical Trades Union, Dublin, which showed a figure running with a torch. In the same year he painted the first Belfast ITGWU banner, now in Liberty Hall.

On 9 October 1948, Thomas Kain died in Hospital after a short illness. His address at that time was 368 Kildare Road. According to his obituary in the *Irish Press*, former comrades gathered at Mount Jerome to discharge three volleys over his coffin, 'draped with the Tricolour and the flag of the Irish Citizen Army.' The chief mourners, according to the obituarist, were Mrs A. Kain (widow) Nuala (daughter) Sean (son) but this was incorrect for the mourners referred to were in fact his niece Anastasia and her children. Others present were Mrs M. Doyle and Mrs K. O'Byrne Whelan (sisters), Miss D. Doyle (niece) and Mr M. Doyle (nephew).¹⁷

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Brendan Byrne

Notes

- 1 T. Snoddy, *Dictionary of Irish artists: 20th century*, Dublin: Merlin Publishing, 2002 edn, p. 295. There is list of Thomas Kain's known paintings, together with photographs of some of them, on the Irish Labour History Society's website: <http://www.irishlabourhistorysociety.com>
- 2 Conversation with Nuala Gilsenan; 1911 Census, household schedule for 26 Charlemont St.
- 3 F. Robbins, *Under the starry plough: recollections of the Irish Citizen Army*, Dublin: Academy Press, 1977, p. 48.
- 4 *Voice of Labour*, 12 May 1923.

- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Robbins, *Under the starry plough*, pp. 55-57. The record book they rescued is now in the National Library of Ireland.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 National College of Art and Design, Payments book, October, November, December 1919.
- 9 This advertisement appeared in the *Voice of Labour* during January, February and March 1924.
- 10 E. O'Connor, *Seán Keating in context: responses to culture and politics in post-Civil war Ireland*, Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2009, p. 23.
- 11 Snoddy, *Dictionary of Irish artists*.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid. This may be the painting, described 'as the first-known portrait of Connolly', which was presented to Michael Mullen then General Secretary of the ITGWU in 1980 by Sean O'Duffy.
- 14 Brendan Byrne, personal information. The Connolly Heron portrait, painted in 1923, was sold for €2400 in April 2006 (personal communication, Barry Murphy. Adams Auctioneers).
- 15 Snoddy, *Dictionary of Irish artists*.
- 16 B. Loftus, *Marching workers: an exhibition of Irish trade banners and regalia*, Dublin and Belfast: Arts Council of Ireland/ICTU, 1978, p. 82.
- 17 *Irish Press*, 11 October 1948.

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