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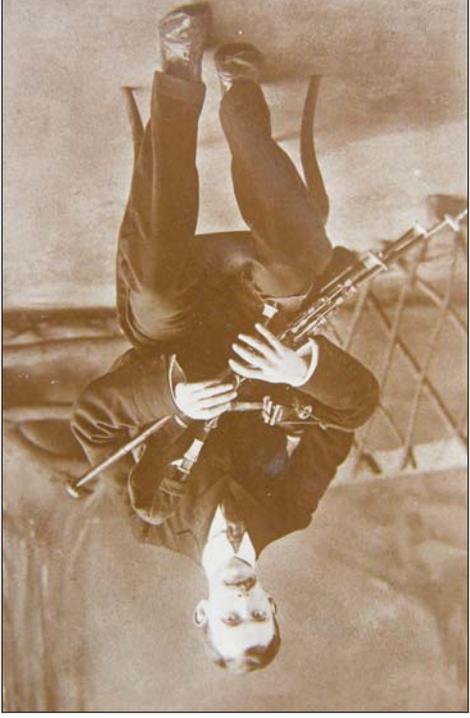
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ARTICLE
 'THE CRUDEST AND MOST PERSONALLY UNBIDD-
 TABLE OF INSTRUMENTS': EAMONN CEANNT AND
 THE PIPES
 Verena Comins



Eamonn Ceannt

EAMONN CEANNT is perhaps one of the least well-known leaders of the 1916 Rising. Described variously as a reserved, quiet, somewhat taciturn and private figure, he has been easily eclipsed by the better-known personalities amongst the other signa-

tories. In fact an *Irish Times* article published on the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising, summarises this position stating that there are only three things for which Ceannt is remembered; as a signatory of the Proclamation, Com-

mandant of the South Dublin Union during the Rising and that he played the pipes for the Pope?

Edward Thomas Kent was born in the police barracks in Ballymore, Co. Galway in 1881, where his father James Kent, originally from Ballyporeen, Co. Tipperary was an officer of the Royal Irish Constabulary. His mother

Joanne Kent (née Galway) was from Cork where his parents met and married in 1870. The family moved to Ardee, Co. Louth when Ceannt was barely two years old, yet he came to be immensely proud of the fact that Gal-

way was his birth-place. This was demonstrated by a con-

scious decision to learn Connacht (rather than Munster) Irish and consolidated through regular return visits to Galway city and Connemara, organising trips firstly with his young family.

The Kent family eventually settled in Dublin on his father's retirement in 1892, and Eamonn attended the Christian Brothers O'Connell School on North Richmond Street. His initial experiments with the Irish language version of his name, Eamonn Ceannt, appear in his school diary in 1897, which may well be the first transla-

tion of the surname Kent to Ceannt? Inspired by mounting hostility to the Boer War and by the centenary of the 1798 Rebellion, Ceannt engages with a growing ideological sense of resistance to cultural imperialism. During

the Boer War, he asks his sister to make a Boer flag, which he hangs outside their house (this, despite the fact that his brother William is fighting with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers) and he takes part in his first national parade, commemorating 1798. He finishes school, a bright, well-educated, intelligent, high achieving young man. Work options for a young working class Catholic are few. Join-

1 Ceannt was the last of the signatories to become the subject of detailed biographical attention. This was rectified in 2006 with the publication of *Supreme Sacrifice* (Cork: Mercier Press) by Galway historian William Henry. A second biography, *Eamonn Ceannt*, part of the O'Brien *16 Lives* Series was published in 2014, written by Ceannt's grandniece Mary Gallagher.

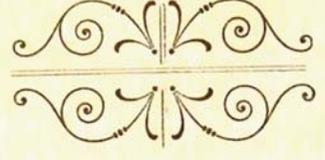
2 *Irish Times* 7 April, 1966.

3 The name 'Ceannt' is unrecorded in the 1901 census records and only three 'Ceanns' appear in the 1911 census: Eamonn, his wife Aine and son Román.

In 1792 a meeting of Irish Harpers was held in Belfast. It is said that within a year from that date they had all died. The pipers of Ireland are few, the good pipers are fewer; the great pipers have all but gone. If the work of revival is not pushed with energy at once; if the old pipers are not persuaded to take up their instruments again and teach pupils; then the Irish Union Pipes, and the old and only correct method of playing them, shall have gone beyond recall. Money is needed for the encouragement of pipe-making and pipe-playing; the collection of information; the acquisition and publication of pipe-music and pipe-literature; the subsidising of poor pipers. Workers are wanted in all parts of the country to co-operate with the Cumann. Further information can be got on Friday nights, or on application at any time to

EDWARD T. KENT,

Hon. Secretary.

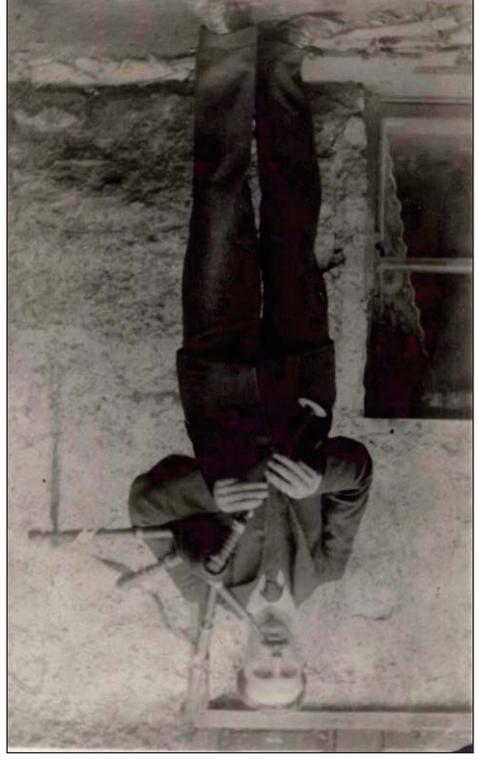


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old and grey' and we will never know what type of piper Eamonn Ceannnt may have become.¹⁷

For both Ceannnt and the DPC, the revival of the 'Irish pipes', carried a dual mandate, in that the revival of both the uilleann and the war pipes was at stake. With-out doubt, it was Ceannnt's performance as a war piper, Breathnach used to say that people who heard Ceannnt play said he was a careful and competent piper, at least on the uilleann pipes.¹² However, there are no accounts of his playing that suggest he was a brilliant player in the way the music of James and later Seamus Ennis might be described. McKenna is equally unconvincing. Describing a performance of his piping at the Ancient Concert Rooms, shortly before the Rising he says 'I do not know whether Eamonn [sic] piped well that night or whether he ever could pipe well'.¹³ In a brief recollection of Ceannnt in *An Fíobaire Seosamh Breathnach* who joined the DPC in 1906, describes Ceannnt as a good piper 'who had a large repertoire of dance tunes, and also played some airs. On one occasion I heard him play part of the "Fox Chase" though I never heard him play the whole of it'.¹⁴ While there is no sonic record of Ceannnt's playing (despite his efforts to secure a phonograph for the DPC), the portrait of Ceannnt playing the uilleann pipes does suggest a particular proficiency. In a separate article, Breathnach goes on to describe Ned Harrison, as 'a very good piper', William Andrews as 'a brilliant piper' and Nicholas Markey, their teacher, as being 'as good as the best'.¹⁵

Determined and fastidious, Ceannnt possesses, in abundance, the essential qualities of a learner-piper, and applies himself to the pipes with the same meticulous attention to detail practised in all areas of his life. In a letter to Aine Ní Bhrádaín, his wife-to-be, on St Patrick's Day, 1903, he writes 'I spent quite a busy morning, and my evening is going to be practise. Wait till I have you in our own house. I wonder what you'll say to my practising and tuning and similar annoyances'.¹⁶ However, the lifetime of dedication to practising advocated by the late Seamus Ennis' seven years of learning; seven years of practising and seven years of playing' is not ultimately an option for Ceannnt in his short life. Doubtless he recognised his own limitations; in his article on the Union pipes, published by *An Claidheamh Solais* in 1911, he himself quotes an Irish proverb 'there never was a good piper "gan blath ban air" who wasn't



Eamonn Ceannnt

12. Personal communication.
13. Daly, Martin (1916) *Memoirs of the Dead* p6.
14. *An Fíobaire* 1(4) March, 1970.
15. *An Fíobaire* 1(3) November, 1969.
16. NLI, MS 13,069/4/5.
17. *An Claidheamh Solais* 29 July, 1911.

performers as a member of the 'Kent brothers band' and his brother Michael described that on buying a cheap fiddle for himself, Eamonn 'took it up and could play St Patrick's Day on it before I could at all'.¹⁶ Volunteer Harry Phillips gives a further insight into that musicality: 'Eamonn [sic] was well known among the lads for his ability to whistle. He could whistle an Irish tune in a peculiar manner, with a full throaty whistle which he laughingly described as traditional Irish whistling'.¹⁷ Ceannnt applied himself concertedly to learning the pipes, rapidly achieving a degree of competency and in October 1901 makes his theatrical debut playing the role of the blind piper in Douglas Hyde's *Casadh an tSugáin* at the Gaiety – the first ever professional production of a play in Irish.¹⁸ By 1902 he is adjudicating the piping competition at the Oireachtas, and is frequently listed as an adjudicator in subsequent years. It has been suggested that he won a gold medal at the Oireachtas for piping in 1906, a detail that has been subsequently misreported in various media: 'Ceannnt's musical talents earned him a gold medal at the 1906 Oireachtas'.¹⁹ In fact the winner of the piping competition in 1906 was Stephen Ruane of Galway and when Ceannnt does compete the following year, 1907, there are just two competitors, himself and Dinny Delaney – and Delaney is victorious on that occasion. He does win a gold medal at the 1906 Oireachtas, but it is for third place in the competition for the best demonstration of teaching methods in Irish, rather than for playing the uilleann pipes.¹⁰ However, Ceannnt clearly understood that the importance of aesthetics in piping, and recognised that the passive transmission of these aesthetics was no longer a viable option. At the Galway Oireachtas in 1913 he announced that 'every old piper in the county should be encouraged to have an apprentice' and his efforts at bringing Martin Kelly and other older practitioners to perform in Dublin and the appointment by the DPC of Nicholas Markey as instructor, reflects such a regard for an older piping aesthetic.¹¹

My thanks to Gerard Manning for providing a copy of a letter from Eamonn Ceannnt to Nally's widow (dated 15 October, 1911) in which this information is cited. Patrick Archer from Oldtown, Co. Dublin another member of the DPC, also claims Ceannnt (and Thomas Ashe) as a pupil, although this may have been the war pipes.

Daly, Martin (1916) *Memoirs of the Dead: Some Impressions*. Dublin: The Powell Press, p6

NLI, MS 41,479/8/14.

BMH WS 848.

8 He also makes an appearance as Gearóid de Barra (another 'Fíobaire Dall') in Thomas Hayes's *Seaghan na Scuab* performed at the 1904 Oireachtas.

9 This is one such example from the *Connacht Tribune* 26 September, 2015, an article by Denise McNamara outlining the 1916 commemorations in Galway.

10 According to the *Western People* 18 August 1906, no first or second prize was awarded. The third prize consisted of a third class rail and car fare for one session tenable at any Irish training college and £1 towards expenses or a gold medal.

11 *Tuam Herald* 9 August, 1913.

