

Julia O'Brien

Julia O'Brien was born 23 February 1901 in Silvermines Co. Tipperary, one of ten children in the family, eight of whom survived into adulthood. Her parents were retired RIC Constable John O'Brien and his second wife Julia Ryan. At the time of Julia's birth the family had charge of the local Post Office in Silvermines. Julia Ryan married John O'Brien in 1882, despite her parents' wishes - they had no love for members of the police force due to the participation of the Constabulary in the eviction of the family from a landholding in Cross, Co. Limerick during the 1850's. Although married to a policeman, Julia continued the family's antipathy towards the force and following the death of her husband in 1915 she ceased to allow the local policemen to leave their bicycles in the yard of the Post Office while attending mass in the local church or when off duty and visiting the local pub. She also stopped giving preferential treatment to the Dunally family, the local landlords, forcing members of the family to queue up to be served in the post office.

Given their mothers attitude towards the local police, it is no surprise that members of the O'Brien family were amongst the early members of the Irish Volunteers and Cumann na mBan following the reorganisation of the Volunteers in 1917. Silvermines was the location of one of the earliest actions by the Volunteers, which resulted in death, following the release of prisoners who had been sent to English jails in the wake of the 1916 Rising. George Sheehan, Boherbee, Silvermines, father of a British soldier home on leave, was wounded in his home, 2 January 1918, while resisting an attempt to steal his son's rifle. Two days later he succumbed from the effects of his wounds. The week following the death of George Sheehan, three brothers of Julia O'Brien, Patrick, John and William were arrested. Two trials in Cork at which the juries failed to agree a verdict led to a 'nolle prosequi' in the case of Patrick O'Brien and a third trial of the two remaining brothers being moved to Dublin. As in the Cork trials, the Jury at the Dublin trial also failed to agree a verdict. The Prosecution then commenced to instigate moves to hold the trial in Belfast, but these were thwarted by Counsel for the defence and the brothers were finally acquitted in November 1919.

Julia, like her brothers was also involved in the Nationalist movement. Outlining her activities during the War of Independence to the Military Service

Pensions Board (MSPB) in 1935, Julia O'Brien stated that she joined Cumann na mBan in February 1917 and shortly after she was elected to the post of Lieutenant. She stated that she took part in routine activities, drilling and training and also organised First Aid classes and dances in support of prisoners. She claimed she moved guns and bombs to and from an arms dump some distance from her home and also set up the procurement of guns and grenades from some British soldiers. Along with another Cumann na mBan member she cut down a telegraph pole, disrupting communications, to protect the Flying Column. She was also involved in gathering information from RIC and Black and Tan's concerning proposed raids and other operations. This led to her being interrogated and searched on several occasions, five of which led to her being arrested but subsequently released.

Following the signing of the Treaty the O'Brien family took the anti-Treaty side and Julia's brothers were all 'on the run'. In September 1922 she carried ammunition for the Paddy McDonnell's column when they were preparing for the 'Boher Ambush', one of the more successful anti-Treaty operations in North Tipperary. In December 1922, Pvt. William Hogan, a member of the National Army based in Silvermines was appointed to the position of Intelligence Officer (I/O). On the night of 2 January 1923, Hogan, along with two other soldiers, called to the O'Brien home in Silvermines, where he threatened and roughly treated Mrs. O'Brien. He told her he was on his way to Devane's pub for a few drinks and would be calling again later and she had better be more forthcoming with her answers on his return, or it would go badly with her. Unbeknownst to Hogan, Dan O'Brien, one of the men he was seeking information about had left upon hearing the knock at the front door and he was hiding at the rear of the house, where he observed the treatment meted out to his mother.

Dan O'Brien followed Hogan and his two companions in the direction of Devane's. On the way he met with his sister Julia and a friend of hers. Getting the two girls to accompany him, he sent them into Devane's on the pretext of buying some tea - in reality their mission was to see where Hogan was located in the pub. Moments after the girls emerged with the information, Dan O'Brien stepped inside the door of the premises from where he shot dead William Hogan, before making good his escape.

Julia O'Brien was arrested the following day, 3 January 1923, on suspicion of complicity in the killing of Pte William Hogan. Although she wasn't charged with the crime Julia was transferred to Mountjoy Jail, Dublin, where she was held in the female wing of the prison. Subsequently she was transferred to Kilmainham Jail where she endured nine days on hunger strike. Regarded as 'a troublemaker' in Kilmainham, she was one of a number of women transferred to the North Dublin Union where she was held until her release.

Julia was released from incarceration in the North Dublin Union on 25 July 1923, following two-hundred and two days in captivity. The following morning she married William James Taylor in St. Paul's Church, Arran Quay, Dublin. James Taylor was born in Malta where his father was serving with the British Army, but the family had returned to live in Nenagh at the end of his father's term of service. James was a member of Fianna Éireann in Nenagh, where he joined the National Army - 5 August 1922 and had served in Silvermines up to his resignation, 17 March 1923. At the time of the marriage Julia was eight months pregnant and consequently life in prison must have been rather difficult for her. Release from jail and marriage to the father of her child must have brought happiness and consolation to Julia, but that happiness was to be short lived.

On the evening of 15 August, barely three weeks after marrying Julia, James Taylor met some friends outside the family home on Dublin Rd., Nenagh. After chatting for some time the men went for a walk, travelling about two miles outside the town. At the Cloughjordan Cross they met with three others from the Kilruane area and the group began walking back towards the town. By this time darkness had descended. The men travelled only a short distance before being halted by a National Army patrol, close to the railway bridge on the Dublin Rd. The men were questioned and their names were taken before being told they could proceed. However they had only walked about fifty metres when they were halted again by a second group of military. Immediately a single shot rang out and James Taylor fell to the ground with a fatal wound to his head.

An inquest was conducted on the circumstances of Taylors death, but co-operation from the military in the proceedings was less than satisfactory. No effort was made by the authorities to determine which soldier had discharged the shot. Rifles belonging to the men were not examined and

ammunition in their possession was not checked. It was generally believed that the killing of Julia's husband was revenge for her involvement in the death of William Hogan. James Taylor was buried in the Taylor family plot in Kenyon St. graveyard, Nenagh.

Following her husband's funeral Julia returned to live with her mother in Silvermines and two weeks later, on 1 September, she gave birth to her daughter Annie Mary (Nano). Nano suffered from a variety of health issues from birth and it is quite likely that these were brought about by Julia's time on hunger strike and the dietary regime in the jails. For instance, fresh milk was not readily available to prisoners who instead received a daily allowance of condensed milk. Also, collective punishment for breach of prison regulations often consisted of a reduction in rations supplied to prisoners.

Julia married Denis O'Rourke, a mechanic and native of Co. Kildare, in Silvermines parish church, 8 July 1928. The couple along with Julia's child, Nano, moved to live in Dublin, where they resided first at 60 Mountjoy Square, before moving to 130 James' St., Dublin. Nano's health continued to cause concern following the move to Dublin and in 1933 Julia lodged a claim on her behalf with the MSPB for the death of her father James Taylor. The claim was refuted on the basis that Julia had remarried prior to the date of the relevant Act. In her own pension claim Julia mentioned the difficulty she had in affording prescribed medicines for her daughter. She also described how in 1941 the child's doctor recommended taking the child out of the city to a country area in an effort to bring some respite to her condition. This forced Julia to move back once more to the Silvermines.

In June 1941 Julia was finally awarded a pension for 31/2 years service. The pension like that of most Cumann na mBan members was granted at Grade E, the lowest grade and gave no recognition to her rank of Lieutenant in the organisation. She was granted a pension of £5 per year which on account of being backdated to the date of her original claim in 1934 gave her an accumulated back money sum of £15 8s. 4d. As Julia submitted her own claim and that of her daughter under her married names - Taylor and O'Rourke, they are not readily associated with her maiden name, Julia O'Brien, under which she was active in CnamB.

Julia's daughter Annie (Nano) died 9 December 1952 at the young age of twenty-nine years. She endured bad health for the duration of her short life. At some later stage Julia moved from 130 James St. to 88 Sundrive

Rd. Dublin 12, where she herself died 4 November 1974. She was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery, along with her daughter and husband Denis O'Rourke. Their grave is located in St Patrick's Section, Grave No. Z1 218.