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# A Birr official in Dublin: Experiences of the fighting of Easter Week, 1916 (From the *Midland Tribune*, 13 May 1916)

Michael Byrne

*In this short account of seeing some of the aftermath of Easter Week, James Mahon, then an official in the Birr Union, and on honeymoon with his young bride Josephine (nee Horan), tells of his experiences. He was a native of Miletree, Birr, a son of James and Margaret (nee Smyth) and took up residence in Tullamore in the 1920s, probably after the workhouse was closed and amalgamated with Tullamore. Mahon was secretary of the former County Board of Health from 1925 to 1941 (the period during which the new county hospital was built) and was later the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages in County Offaly. James Mahon would be much better known as the co-owner of the Ritz Cinema and the Grand Central Cinema in Tullamore. In that capacity he would be well-remembered by Tullamore people as he was still managing the cinema in his late seventies, and driving a Triumph Herald sports car. Mahon opened the Ritz Cinema in 1946 and it continued in business until 1980. He was father to the well-known solicitor, the late Seamus N. Mahon (appointed a District Justice in 1976), who died in 2000 and grandfather to Brian, Raymond and Dermot Mahon of the firm of Hoey & Denning, Solicitors, Tullamore, and His Honour, Mr Justice Alan Mahon of the Court of Appeal. James F. Mahon died on 13 August 1972 aged 84 and was predeceased by his wife Josephine who died on 3 Dec. 1958.<sup>1</sup> His cinemas made a huge contribution to the cultural life of Tullamore over fifty years.*

Amongst those who left Birr for Dublin on Easter Monday was Mr James Mahon, Assistant Clerk of the Birr Union, who was accompanied by Mrs Mahon. All went well, he says, until they left Kingsbridge (renamed Heuston Station in 1966), and then they found that the tram on the station side of the Quays was not running. They did not know that a rebellion had broken out in the city, and had no intimation as to the seriousness of the situation. They crossed to the other side of the river, and went to Rosses Hotel. Afterwards Mr Mahon

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<sup>1</sup> Information from Offaly History Centre, Tullamore, Clonminch RC Cemetery inscriptions; *Offaly Independent*, 18 Aug. 1972.

went to catch the last tram down the Northern Quays. This tram, he says, did not return. If he had got on this it would have taken him right into the firing. He made his way back to the hotel, but then found that the whole place was full up, as were all the neighbouring hotels and houses. The difficulty then was to find a place to stay in. After much trouble he succeeded in doing so, thinking that he would be able to return next day, as he had already discovered that trains would not run that evening. Tuesday and Wednesday he paid visits to Kingsbridge. The firing was very severe on Thursday and Friday. On Saturday evening a party of soldiers said that peace had been proclaimed. Mr. Mahon then got down the city. He tells a tragic story of two men he saw shot off Arran Quay. They were at a corner in a crowd, when they were taken down by stray bullets. One was killed. Another man he saw shot in Prussia Street.

Mr Mahon gives graphic descriptions of the city. The stench at places, he says, was bad. Bodies of men and horses could be seen lying on the streets. At one particular corner a pool of blood had formed. This had been roughly scraped off. In parts it was inches thick.

Asked as to the food supplies, Mr Mahon stated that there might be a plentitude in one street and nothing in another. The sentries prevented communication. Women and children were allowed to go out, at times under a white flag. Men were liable to be shot at sight. In the street in which he was situate there was enough of food, though sometimes commodities were lacking.

The sniping, he says, was a particular feature of the situation. He had been told by a military officer of another officer who had been shot between three ladies where he was standing talking to them. Women and children were respected. A military officer, he says, spoke in high terms of the shooting of the insurgents. This officer remarked that if these men were in France they would have done wonders against the Germans. Mr Mahon says that he was told of a woman in Dublin who was said to have three sons in the British army in France, and three others fighting with the Sinn Féiners. Mr Mahon was unable to leave Dublin until Wednesday. He then obtained a pass, which he intends to keep as a souvenir. It is a type-written document, to the following effect: -

Dublin Metropolitan Police, 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1916 – Please pass James Mahon, Manor Buildings, through the streets of the city, and D.M.P. area. It is signed, or rather rubber-stamped with the name of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. To permit of travelling from the Kingsbridge this was countersigned by the RIC as follows:-“The within pass is valid outside the D.M.P. area. – Neville Chamberlain, Inspector General RIC – 5, “16”.

Mrs. Mahon had also to be provided with a pass. Mr. Mahon adds that Lieut-Colonel Craske [of the Birr-based Leinster Regiment] was on duty at Kingsbridge Station.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See *King's County Chronicle*, 10 Feb. 1916. Lieut.-Col. John Craske, D.S.O., was appointed as a Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George.