

# ON THE BRINK

## The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

PRO / ANTI HOME RULE

EASTER RISING & BATTLE OF THE SOMME

### CATHAL O'SHANNON

Cathal O' Shannon was born in Drumsough, Randalstown, in June 1889. His mother was Eilís McLarnon and Charles, his father, was a train driver and a staunch Parnellite. The family moved to Draperstown when Cathal was a young boy. Here he learned some initial Irish from a local schoolteacher. While attending St. Columb's College, Co. Derry, he attended classes with a native Irish speaker living in Ballinascreen, Draperstown. He then sat his Irish examinations at school and published essays in Irish nationalist publications, including the Irish Peasant, writing under the pseudonym 'Sean Athair'.

In 1909, he took a clerical post with Heysham Shipping Company, Belfast and after joined the Gaelic League and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). He helped to found the Belfast branch of Na Fianna Éireann, a semi-militant, nationalist Boy Scout organisation being set up across Ireland. He was co-founder of the Socialist Party of Ireland, whose leader, James Connolly, asked him to join the staff of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union in Belfast.

In 1913, O' Shannon helped to establish the Belfast Battalion of the Irish Volunteers. He sat on its Civil Committee, with others, including IRB leader, Bulmer Hobson, who was Committee Chairman. They were responsible for directing the policy of the Volunteers; fundraising, obtaining training facilities and procuring arms and other equipment.

On Easter 1916, the Rising began. It was planned that the Belfast, Tyrone and Monaghan Volunteers would meet in Dungannon and then make their way to Connaught, linking up with Volunteers there to participate in the rebellion. On Easter Saturday, O' Shannon, with a large contingent of Irish Volunteers and some members of Cumann na mBan, headed off to Coalisland. However, the following day they found the Tyrone Volunteers were unwilling to move. MacNeill's countermand had caused utter confusion in regard to their orders. The women headed on to Dublin and the men dispersed. Once back in Belfast, O' Shannon headed for North Dublin where he intended to join the fighting but was too late. He returned to Belfast and was arrested by British Army Officers. He was initially interned in Dublin's Mountjoy Prison and Richmond Barracks and was then sent to Frongoch Jail in North Wales and later to Reading Jail in England.

After the Rising, O'Shannon was released under the Amnesty of 1917. He was elected to Dáil Éireann as a Labour TD in 1922 but lost his seat at the following election. He remained an active socialist and trade unionist until his death in 1969.



Photograph of O' Shannon (left) coming off hunger strike at the Mater Hospital, Dublin, 4th May 1919. He is being visited by Father Augustine Hayden of the Capuchin Order of Friars.