

Jackie Clarke

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

1. Jackie Clarke was a local fish merchant in Ballina, County Mayo who amasses a stunning collection of Irish artifacts and memorabilia that spans four centuries.
2. He died in the year 2000 leaving this mass collection to his wife, Mrs. Anne Clarke. His wishes were to display it in his Ballina, Mayo than to lose it in a fire in the family home above the family shop, Clarke's Salmon Smokery.
3. Mrs. Clarke contacted Sinead McCooole, an author and historian, from Dublin who reluctantly selected items for exhibition. Some of the items for this exhibit was an original rare copy of the 1916 Easter Proclamation – Ireland's Declaration of Independence. You see Ms. McCooole scheduled 6 weeks for going through this items which she thought would be a few weeks too long.
4. Ms. McCooole was led to Jackie Clarke's "locked room," which was for many years off limits to the family. Inside were bundles and bundles of wrapped paper; fish boxes packed with documents; stuff and stuff and more stuff.
5. The 6 weeks McCooole was supposed to spend became 6 months but no more than a year. Well she was still there 8 years later looking over what now is known as the Jackie Clarke collection.
6. The Jackie Clarke collection is a treasure of more than 100,000 items that provide a retelling of Ireland's long struggle to free itself from English rule.
7. Jackie Clarke started to collect items in a scrapbook as a book and later this grew in to collecting fragile maps, rare newspapers, political poster and editorial cartoons, books diaries, photographs, films, etc.

9. There were so many items, McCoole did not know which ones that stood out the most. Was it:

- a. 1916 letter from the commander of Kilmainham jail asking for a priest to visit the Easter Rebellion leader Padraic Pearse before his execution.
- b. The 1910 poster advertising a talk by another rebellion leader, James Connolly, at Cavanagh's Restaurant in New York City.
- c. The fabric flower, called the cockade, that Wolfe Tone, wore affixed to his hat when he was captured while leading a failed rebellion against the British in 1798?
- d. A note book showing the tally of Irish parliamentary vote on the Anglo-Irish treaty in 1922.

10. You see Jackie Clarke was sent to a boarding school in Dublin, he spent his free time not at Rugby matches but in old bookshops searching for pieces of Irish history. He began a correspondence with Joe Clarke, an Easter Rebellion veteran and lifelong republican – one devoted to a united Ireland – guided the unrelated Clarke in choosing items for his growing collection.

11. Jackie Clarke became a town councilor (on the Irish Republican ticket of Sinn Féin), a mayor of Ballina.

12. Mrs. Clarke remembers her husband's excitement when a wrapped package arrived by post. "He never opened it straightaway. He would wait until the end of day, close the shop and head upstairs like a boy with a birthday package."

13. The collection is valued in the millions. The Mayo County council managed to buy a landmark bank building on Pearse Street, just down the road from the fish shop.

14. Jackie Clarke developed his own system. McCoole had to develop her system. The 1916 material here; 1798 material there; land wars; war of independence; civil war; hunger strike, Bloody Sunday, etc.

15. At one point she came across a newspaper page from 1997 that had been clipped and folded to emphasize a photograph of an Irish author giving a lecture in London.

That author: Herself, Sinead McCoolle.