

Irish Civil War: Friendship, Loyalty and Complexity Among Friends

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Harry Boland died on August 1st, 1922. Upon his passing, Kathleen O’Connell, secretary to Éamon de Valera observed that Dev “looked crushed and broken. He lost his most faithful friend.” Michael Collins, having regretted his friend’s death, wrote to his fiancée Kitty Kiernan, “I passed Vincent’s Hospital and saw the crowd outside. My mind went in to him, Harry lying there dead, and I thought of the times together. I had sent a wreath. I suppose they would return it torn up.”



Harry Boland, Michael Collins and Éamon de Valera

This was just one of the many emotional reactions from Boland’s contemporaries on both sides of the Civil War divide. Much of Boland’s appeal was due to him being known as a genial, good-humored leader within the Irish revolutionary movement.

Harry Boland was born, like many nationalists of his generation, into Dublin’s lower middle class in 1887. His father, a prominent fenian and GAA official, had an enormous influence on his son.

Harry followed that familiar path

through the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Along with his two older brothers and sister Kathleen, Harry took part in the Easter Rising and was imprisoned in England. On his release he became an active member of Sinn Féin, for whom he was elected TD for south Roscommon in the historic election of 1918. In 1919, he and Michael Collins narrowly escaped arrest when many of the members of the Dáil government were imprisoned by the British. The two worked closely together thereafter in Dublin, raising money for the underground Irish Republican government. He became a key figure in rebuilding the national movement, mainly in raising funds for the Irish Republic, becoming close friends to both Éamon de Valera and Michael Collins.

Around this time Boland and Collins had grown particularly close when other Sinn Féin leaders were in jail: they were around the same age, wrestled and played hurley together. It was with Collins that Boland spent most of his free time. On Sundays they would often head for Granard, Co. Longford to stay at the Greville Arms Hotel. Away from the hectic city life Harry and Mick enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere and the companionship of the Kiernan sisters. Boland and Collins’ fell in love with the same girl, Kitty Kiernan. She was originally Boland’s girl and at one stage it seemed it was Boland, not Collins, she planned to marry. But in the end, she eventually preferred Collins, probably because he was the bigger catch. Boland said he was sure the ‘triangle’ as he termed it would never spoil their friendship, although it did place an element of complexity in their relationship. He would hardly have been human if he had not felt some resentment afterwards. After their deaths, an acquaintance of theirs reminisced, “I remember seeing their two heads on the pillow, fast asleep, bedroom door ajar in case of a raid, and Collins’ bare arm rested on a bedside table – between two revolvers.”

In truth, their break in friendship came over their respective stances on the Anglo-Irish Treaty. While Anti-Treaty, Boland became a key player in trying to mend the split. Yet at the outbreak of the Civil War, Boland became quartermaster of the anti-Treaty IRA. Boland took a

direct part and became a determined participant in fighting in both Dublin and Blessington, in Co. Wicklow.

Where Boland and Collins were genuine friendly soul mates, Harry's relationship to Éamon de Valera's was more in terms of a loyal lieutenant. In 1919, Boland was nominated by Éamon de Valera, the President of the Dáil Éireann, to join him as a special envoy to the United States as the advance man whose main duty was organizing every aspect of the American tour. They both made another trip to the United States in 1920 but when de Valera returned to Ireland in early 1921, Boland remained to coordinate Irish Republican publicity, fund raising and more secretly arms purchasing.

In 1922, the National Army were beginning to close on him. Boland was mortally wounded when shot during a botched arrest by National Army soldiers in Skerries' Grand Hotel. He lingered in Dublin's St. Vincent's hospital for two days before dying.

Boland told his sister Kathleen, the man who shot him was a friend with whom he was imprisoned with after the Easter Rising but refused to say the man's name. He asked to be buried beside Cathal Brugha in Glasnevin cemetery. Boland's funeral was a major procession through Dublin city, an extraordinary turnout for one of the most well-liked figures of the Irish revolution.

The Anglo-Irish treaty triggered Irishmen to turn on one another – neighbor against neighbor and sometimes family member against family member. Best friends did not seem like friends anymore, in fact in many cases, they were on opposing sides of the Civil War.

Harry Boland was lively and engaging man with real diplomatic skills. He was a communicator, not a desk man, and more a spokesperson and diplomat than a policymaker. Ireland lost many prominent future leaders; Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins, and Cathal Brugha, just to name a few. The Civil War would leave many of the most talented participants in the struggle of independence dead, and a newly independent country deprived of their vital further contribution.