The grey-stoned building of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) on St Stephen’s Green was an important if unwitting participant of the historic events of Easter Week 1916. From Tuesday the 25th of April to Sunday the 30th it housed the garrison made up of members of the Irish Citizen Army led by its Chief of Staff Commandant Michael Mallin and his second in command Countess Constance Markievicz. Born in 1880, Michael Mallin was a hugely experienced soldier who joined the Royal Scots Fusiliers as a drummer boy. On retirement from the army after 14 years of service he returned to his native Dublin and became a silk-weaver. Commandant Mallin met and became firm friends with James Connolly during the labour dispute of 1913 and three years later at the age of 36 became one of the first recruits to the Irish Citizen Army.

In Countess Markievicz Commandant Mallin could not have chosen a more unlikely or more able deputy. Born in 1868 in London to Sir Henry and Lady Gore-Booth the young Constance spent much of her childhood at the family estate in Lissadell, in Sligo. In 1900 she married a Polish Count, Casimir Dunin de Markievicz and together they moved to Ireland to set up home in Rathmines, Dublin. On her return to Ireland the Countess immersed herself in revolutionary politics, joining Sinn Féin and James Connolly’s labour movement. Countess Markievicz worked ceaselessly for women’s suffrage and the national cause, delivering lectures and writing articles for *Bean na hÉireann*, the journal of Inighnidhe na hÉireann [Daughters of Ireland] which she joined in 1907. In 1913 she joined the Irish Citizen Army and in 1914 became a founder member of Cumann na mBan.

On the afternoon of Monday the 24th of April 1916 Commandant Mallin and his garrison took up position in St Stephen’s Green. Trenches were dug and barricades were built in the Green with a makeshift Red Cross post established in one of its summerhouses. That afternoon Mallin, aware of the relative vulnerability of his garrison’s position, ordered Sergeant Frank Robbins and Countess Markievicz together with a handful of rebels to secure the nearby RCSI and search for rifles and ammunition belonging to the Officers’ Training Corps, which at the time was attached to the College. The manner in which the rebels gained access to RCSI is one of the building’s many historical anecdotes. The story of 1916 goes that Dr John Knott an elderly, erudite and rather eccentric Fellow of the College who lived on York Street and regularly visited the library where he spent his day studying subjects such as spontaneous combustion arrived at the St Stephen’s Green entrance to the College and knocked on the door to gain entry. As the bedel (caretaker) attempted to tell Dr Knott through the half opened door that the College was closed by order of the Registrar Sergeant Robbins wedged the door open with his foot and the rebels along with Countess Markievicz rushed in.

Legend goes that Dr Knott continued on his journey to the library totally oblivious to the chaos and gunfire surrounding him. To this day a bullet hole in the brass plate on the inside of the door to the College Boardroom on the second floor which came from shots aimed at the rebels from St Stephen’s Green, bears silent witness to these events. Once secured, heavy machine-gun fire from the roof of the Shelbourne Hotel on Tuesday the 25th forced Mallin and his troops to withdraw from their positions in Stephen’s Green and join their colleagues in the shelter of the College. Recording his personal recollections of 1916 years later Dr Louis (A.D.) Courtney who, as a result of staff shortages due to the Rising, was left in charge of St Vincent’s Hospital (then on the corner of Leeson Street and St Stephen’s Green) despite the fact that he had only graduated from UCD the previous year, recalled “On Tuesday morning at about five o’clock I heard a fairly large chorus singing the Soldiers’ Song. It was certainly very moving to hear it echoing across the Green. It continued for about half an hour and came from either the Liberty Hall in the Green or the garrison in the College of Surgeons.”

The dark panelled walls of the College Hall provided the perfect sleeping quarters for the men, women and boys who occupied the College. A photograph taken immediately after the Rising shows mattresses and pillows on the floor, which is also strewn with buckets, water siphons, and tins. A torn garment has been discarded on a mattress and nearby an overcoat occupies the back of a chair. Another photograph shows a table of makeshift bombs, which the rebels made by filling old ‘Bournville Cocoa’ and ‘Blauds Health Salts’ tins with gunpowder. It shows
Figure 1 —
THE COLLEGE HALL IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE RISING
(Photograph © RCSI)

Figure 2 —
THE DESTROYED PORTRAIT OF QUEEN VICTORIA
(Photograph © RCSI)

Figure 3 —
COUNTESS MARKIEVICZ
(Photograph © RCSI)
the handmade missiles captioned “live bombs” surrounded by additional ammunition including bullets. A third photograph portrays a chair on top of a table beneath a portrait of Queen Victoria. The painting has been ripped from its frame. It is said that on seeing the destroyed portrait Commandant Mallin was so furious that he threatened to shoot the man who had committed the act. He had given strict orders that no reckless damage was to be done inside the College. However, on learning that the culprit was a young boy who had used the canvas to make leggings Mallin chose to severely reprimand him instead. These photographs offer a unique insight to the conditions rebels fought in RCSI and bear witness to the lives lived and lost throughout that historical week within its walls. The rooms and some of the furniture depicted in these photographs remain largely unchanged to this day.

Describing Easter Week 1916 at the College J.D.H Widdess, renowned Irish medical historian and past RCSI librarian relates “Space beneath the seats of the Chemistry Lecture theatre in the rear of the building was fitted up as a mortuary. In the entrance hall barricades were constructed with books from the library. Many shots aimed at the defenders came through the windows of the Board Room on the upper storey, which faced the Green.”

Food and rations in the College like in the other garrisons around the city were scare. Food could only be obtained by tunneling from house to house between the College and Grafton Street. Mary Donnelly was one of the women given the onerous task of foraging for food and is quoted in an article by Diarmuid Breathnach in An Cosantóir.

“Immediately after the College of Surgeons was taken our men proceeded to break through all the walls dividing the houses northward to Grafton Street and southwards to Cuffe Street. As each house was taken it had to be guarded and this meant that food had to be carried under fire from the lane beside the College and through rough holes in walls where a bullet through the window on landings threatened us as we clambered up assisted by the men on guard in these lonely houses.”

A big fire was lit in the fireplace of one of the large classrooms to the rear of the College, which was used to make porridge when eventually some oatmeal was delivered to the garrison. According to Countess Markievicz “on Tuesday and Wednesday we were absolutely starved. In the beginning men coming off guard could only get a few cream crackers, supplied by McDonagh from Jacob’s factory, before trying to get some sleep.”
On Thursday the stock of arms and ammunition in the RCSI belonging to the Officers’ Training Corps were finally unearthed, a discovery, which served to greatly boost morale within the College. Saturday brought further good news with the delivery of a good issue of rations including four or five pounds of bacon. The rebels decided to save the meat for dinner the next day but as history informs us they were however denied that pleasure.

On Sunday the 30th of April the message of surrender reached the RCSI. Mallin issued an order of withdrawal to the men who occupied the surrounding houses. The garrison assembled in the College and Mallin and Markievicz with their group of approximately 109 men and 10 women surrendered to Captain de Courcy Wheeler, whose brother was then a fellow of the College and was shortly to become its President. It is reported that on surrendering Countess Markievicz saluted Captain Wheeler, kissed her gun before turning it in and refused a lift to Dublin Castle preferring instead to march there with her comrades. That evening the group were moved to Richmond Barracks and later both Commandant Mallin and Countess Markievicz were imprisoned in Kilmainham Jail. She was never to see him alive again.

Widdess accounts that “from the date of surrender until Saturday, May 27th, the College was occupied by 400 men of the 5th Lincolnshire Regiment with twelve officers under the command of Colonel Walter. A sub-committee of the College was appointed to arrange an application for compensation, and the Registrar at the time Alfred Miller prepared the statement of claim, for which he was granted an honorarium of £100. An estimate of £764 was accepted in April of the following year for the repair of damage resulting from the Rising.”

The events of Easter Week 1916 resulted in complete ruin for the ill-fated RCSI Caretaker. In the aftermath of the surrender two silver-backed ladies’ hairbrushes were discovered hidden under loose floorboards in his dining room. He and his family had been confined
for the entire week, first in one of the bedrooms of his apartment and later in the College’s basement kitchen. Despite this confinement and his 26 years of service to the College the caretaker was accused of stealing or concealing the brushes and dismissed immediately with a mere £2 in lieu of notice.

For her part in the Rising Countess Markievicz was sentenced to death but because she was a woman this was commuted to life imprisonment. Markievicz spent a year in prisons in England during which time she was baptized a Catholic before returning to Ireland and a heroine’s welcome.

In his 1981 article in An Cosantóir, Diarmuid Breathnach relates that Captain de Courcy Wheeler gave evidence at Commandant Michael Mallin’s court martial. When asked if he wanted to question Wheeler, Mallin declined. However, he commented “I would wish it placed on record how grateful my comrades and myself are for the kindness and consideration which Captain (de Courcy) Wheeler has shown us during this time.”

In a letter to his wife from Kilmainham Jail dated the 7th of May 1916 Michael Mallin wrote, “My darling Wife, pulse of my heart, this is the end of all things earthly; sentence of death has been passed, and at a quarter to four tomorrow the sentence will be carried out by shooting and so must Irishmen pay for making Ireland a free nation... I find no fault with the soldiers or police. I forgive them from the bottom of my heart. Pray for all the souls that fell in this fight, Irish and English.”

In this poignant letter the young commandant, father and loving husband said that his confession had been heard by Father McCarthy and that “God’s will be done.”

According to Breathnach “On May 8th 1916 Commandant Michael Mallin faced a firing squad and prayed into the rifles.”

Today the beautiful original RCSI building remains much as it was in 1916. Fortunately unlike other rebel strongholds across the city it was spared any major structural or internal damage. Walk up the stone steps to the St Stephen’s Green entrance, look left and right and you will see the tell-tale bullet holes in the surrounding façade. On entering the College walk up the main staircase to the second floor. Here is where the main rebel activity took place. Stop for a minute in the College Boardroom and remember those who ninety years ago made the RCSI an integral part of Irish History.

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