

Nevil Shute's Easter Rising

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Arthur Hamilton Norway was appointed Secretary of the Irish Post Office in 1912, to the dismay of nationalists who protested against the choice of an English civil servant over the Irishman who was assistant secretary. However, with Home Rule looking likely and Norway suffering from progressive deafness, it was believed that the appointment would be temporary. One of his immediate undertakings was the supervision of the improvement of the General Post Office building which had become rather decrepit. The GPO reopened about six weeks before Easter 1916. Writing after the Rising, Mrs. Hamilton Norway described it as follows: 'It was really beautiful. The roof was a large glass dome with elaborate plaster work, beautiful white pillars, mosaic floor, counters all of red teak wood and bright brass fittings everywhere – a public building of which any great city might be proud; and in six weeks all that is left is a smoking heap of ashes!'

Norway Family

The Norway family came to live in Dublin in 1912: Arthur, his wife Mary Louisa and their sons Fred and Nevil. They leased a residence called South Hill, off Mount Merrion Avenue in Blackrock. It was a big house with extensive grounds which was an attractive place of adventure for the two teenage boys from Ealing in London. Nevil later wrote that 'it opened up country pleasures that we had hardly dreamed of'. This was a happy interlude for the family before tragedy struck.



South Hill in the 1950s.

At the outbreak of World War One in 1914, Fred was a student in Trinity College Dublin. He joined the army and was sent to the Western Front in the spring of 1915. In June, he was wounded by a shell near Armentières and died a few weeks later. His death at the age of nineteen was traumatic for

the family and for his sixteen year old brother. The associations with South Hill were so poignant and overwhelming that the family decided to leave. They moved into the Royal Hibernian Hotel on Dawson Street. The treasured possessions of their dead son, including his sword, as well as some of Mrs. Norway's valuables were placed in her husband's safe in the GPO, 'the safest place in Dublin,' as she imagined.

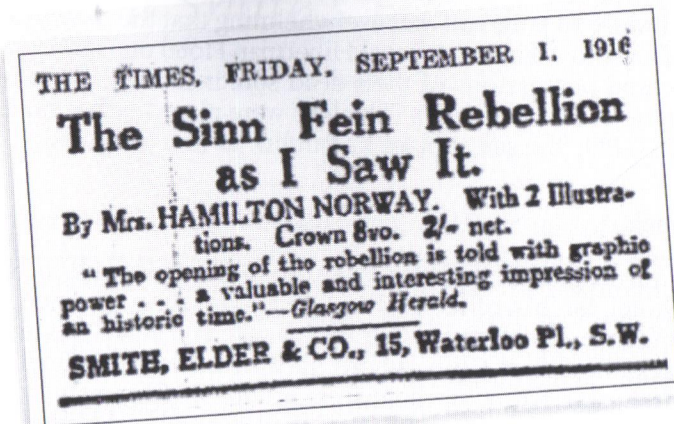
Easter Week

On the morning of Easter Monday, 1916, Arthur Hamilton Norway left the hotel for his office in the GPO, intending to catch up on correspondence. He arranged to meet his wife and son Nevil for lunch at the Sackville Street Club, where he was a member. Nevil was at home for Easter from his boarding school in Shrewsbury. In an uncanny premonition of trouble, Nevil had cleaned and loaded his late brother's pistol and given it to his father two days earlier. At about 11.30 a.m. Norway was summoned to meet the Chief Secretary in Dublin Castle, so he was not present when the rebels arrived only minutes later to take over the building.

Nevil and his mother went towards the GPO at lunchtime as arranged, but were turned away 'by trigger-happy young men in green uniforms in great excitement', as she described the Volunteers. After his mother had gone back to the hotel and learned that her husband was safe, Nevil went out again and witnessed the attack on a group of lancers on Sackville Street, the first deaths that he saw. He had begun military training in England and fully intended to follow his brother's path into the army. He wrote later about his first experience of conflict on Easter Monday in Dublin: 'In this sad but interesting fighting I was far more comfortable and at home than my parents. This was my cup of tea. I was mentally conditioned for war having trained for it for two years.' Nevil's full name was Nevil Shute Norway and he was to become famous as a novelist under the name Nevil Shute. Some of his books became memorable films, such as *No Highway* (1948), *A Town Like Alice* (1950) and *On the Beach* (1957).

Letters of Mrs. Norway

Mary Louisa Hamilton Norway wrote four long letters to her sister Grace in England during Easter Week and these were published in book form in September 1916 under the title *The Sinn Féin Rebellion as I Saw It*.



The letters provide an extraordinary firsthand account of the week and were republished in 1999, along with Arthur's memoir 'Irish experiences in war'. This 1999 book is entitled *The Sinn Féin Rebellion as They Saw It* and has an informative introduction by Keith Jeffery. The autobiography of Nevil Shute is also a source of information, although he devotes little attention to the events of the week and his mother's account is more revealing. This article focuses mainly on Nevil Shute's role during the week about which his mother wrote: 'This week has been a wonderful week for N. Never before has a boy of just seventeen had such an experience'.

Later in the afternoon of Easter Monday, Nevil persuaded his mother that the city was quiet enough to walk again to Sackville Street where they stood opposite the GPO looking at 'the great green flag with the words 'Irish Republic' on it in large white letters' flying over the building. On hearing shots they quickly returned to the hotel. The curious Nevil went out again that evening to St. Stephen's Green and saw three men in each of the trenches which had been dug just inside the railings. Despite the intense firing around the city, he attempted to get to Dublin Castle. Arthur managed to leave the Castle after midnight and joined his family in the hotel.

On Wednesday, Mary Louisa wrote that 'Nevil did a very fine thing yesterday'. After hearing machine-gun fire in the area of St. Stephen's Green, he walked to the scene. He saw a group near the railings

opposite Kildare Street, where there was a barricade made from park benches. Nevil saw that there was a civilian lying across the barricade 'with all his lower jaw blown away and bleeding profusely'. The man was alive but very seriously wounded. Nevil jumped over the railing, into the Sinn Féin side, and berated the rest of the onlookers for not helping the man. Three men then climbed over to help him and they used a bench as a stretcher to carry the unfortunate victim to a nearby hospital, probably Mercers. He died there a few minutes later.

On Thursday, the Red Cross came to the hotel asking for men to help them. To his mother's relief, Nevil immediately volunteered. She felt it was safer for him to be with an organised group than to be wandering around on his own as he had been, trying to help the wounded. Nevil wrote that he 'cruised around the streets in a motor ambulance picking up casualties and taking them to hospital'. Mrs. Norway was generally optimistic that they would not be harmed, but had some underlying fears. She wrote to her sister: 'We quite expect to come out of this, but if we don't, N. is yours'. Later on Thursday, Mr. Norway was called to the hotel phone to receive this enigmatic message from Nevil: 'You must not expect to see or hear from me till this is over'. His parents feared the worst and became convinced that Nevil had been taken hostage by the rebels. Although the Red Cross assured them that none of their volunteers was missing, they remained very concerned for a few hours before they learned that he was safe in Dublin Castle. Next day, Nevil turned up at the hotel and told them he was trying to reassure them with a succinct message about his plans, knowing that he would be out all night. He was annoyed that his mother was so 'nervy'. Perhaps her reaction was understandable, in the light of the tragic loss of her eldest son.

Nevil's work with the Red Cross involved going into houses where there were wounded Irish Volunteers and bringing them to hospital. As a grieving mother herself, Mary Louisa Norway had sympathy for the rebels:

One of the most awful things in this terrible time is that there must be scores of dead and dying Sinn Féiners, many of them mere lads, that no one can get at in the houses, and where they will remain till after the rebellion; and in some cases the houses take fire and they are all burnt.

She wrote that Thursday was the worst day for them, with desperate fighting in nearby Grafton Street and outside the hotel. A sniper was active in the roofs around Dawson Street. The sound of heavy artillery

could be heard and she told her sister of the scene at night as she watched from her bedroom window:

It seemed as if the whole city was on fire, the glow extending right across the heavens, and the red glare hundreds of feet high, while above the roar of the fires the whole air seemed vibrating with the noise of the great guns and machine guns. It was an inferno! We remained spell-bound and I can't tell you how I longed for you to see it.

She described the looting which went on, saying she had never seen anything so brazen. She had a sewing machine and helped the Red Cross by making armlets and large flags to identify their volunteers. There were instances where Red Cross units were fired on and while Nevil witnessed some of these, he was not involved in such incidents. On Friday night there was a sense that the Royal Hibernian Hotel might be a target and all guests congregated in the lounge ready to evacuate at short notice. On Saturday 29 April, Nevil spent the morning filling cans of petrol for the ambulances and in the afternoon he went around with the Lord Mayor collecting food for 40 starving refugees who were being sheltered in the Mansion House. That evening he was on the streets again, bringing in a wounded 78 year old man, confidently assuring him that he would recover fully.



Nevil Shute Norway as a young man.

To her regret, the valuables which Mrs. Norway had stored in the safe in her husband's office did not survive, although in the excavations of the GPO she found some molten fragments of the family's jewellery, glass and cutlery. She particularly lamented that all the keepsakes of her eldest son were lost. In what reads like an incredible incident, she wrote that Nevil found a motor-bike in perfect working order in the shattered ruins of the GPO. He rode it back to the hotel and later handed it over to the police in Dublin Castle.

Mary Louisa's last letter was written on 28 May 1916, as she was preparing to move to Celbridge House which friends had made available to them. 'I am going to rest and recuperate for the next five

weeks,' she wrote, 'and try to remember out of this awful time only the kindness and sympathy that has been shown to us by so many Irish friends'.

In Arthur Hamilton Norway's memoir of his time in Dublin he described his frustration at the lack of ability evident in the administration of Dublin Castle before and during the Rising and he was particularly critical of Sir Matthew Nathan, whose actions during Easter Week he described as 'not cool and steady, but rather bewildered'. Nathan was the under-secretary at Dublin Castle.

After the Rising

On his return to school in Shrewsbury, the shy and reserved Nevil Shute Norway found himself the centre of attention with his eyewitness account of the events in Dublin. It was the beginning of a more confident period for him. In 1956, he published an autobiography entitled *Slide Rule: The Autobiography of an Engineer*, the title referring to his profession before he became a full-time writer. He gave a brief and modest account of his experience in Dublin at Easter 1916. 'I was a callow youth acting as a labourer and a runner for more experienced people. I would not like it to be thought that I was playing a great part.' He recalled being among a group thanked at the end of hostilities by General Sir John Maxwell, the military commander. He summed up his experience during the week as 'another push along the road to self-confidence'.

Nevil was awarded a certificate of honour by St John's Ambulance for his 'meritorious duty'. Although he made light of his experience, it must have had some significance for him as he observed in his autobiography that 'the very noble parchment talking about gallant conduct in tending the wounded at great personal risk' was on the wall in his study. Nevil had an abiding interest in aircraft engineering, a theme which features strongly in his novels. His ambition was to join the Royal Flying Corps in the Great War, but he failed a final medical examination because of his profound stammer, so he settled for a civilian role. He joined the Naval Reserve during World War Two but in 1950 he left England and spent the remainder of his life in Australia, where many of his 23 novels are set. Several of his books were best-sellers and he was often referred to as 'the prince of storytelling'. His popularity was at its height in the 1960s and I recall his books as being amongst the first novels I read. They were tales of



Nevil Shute, novelist.

action and adventure, stirring and exciting, but with nothing to shock or disturb any reader.

One of his novels has an Irish theme, *Beyond the Black Stump* (1956). The novel is set in Australia, where the brothers Jack and Tom Regan are the owners of a sheep farm called Laragh Station. The Regans are hard-living, hard-drinking men fitting the common Irish stereotype and they had a background as republican activists who emigrated to Australia after 1922. The novel is not among Shute's best and it is noteworthy that some rather unattractive

characters are given the names of 1916 leaders. One is named Countess Markievicz and she has sons named James Connolly and Joseph Plunkett. In another of Shute's novels, *Requiem for a Wren*,



South Hill today.

there is a likeable dog named Dev. The impression formed is that Nevil had no great admiration for the rebel leaders; his mother had described Countess Markievicz as 'one of the most dangerous of the leaders' and she hoped that she would be treated as severely as the men.

There is today a devoted band of Nevil Shute enthusiasts who refer to themselves as 'Shutists' and there is a website devoted to his life and work (www.nevilshute.org). It has a brief account of a return visit which Nevil paid to South Hill in 1946, when he was welcomed by the owner, Leo Hannan. The Hannan family lived there from 1942 to 1964.

The large house set in eleven acres of grounds was subsequently sold to a religious order, and later to a developer. It is still standing today, though much smaller than it was, and it has lost its former entrance off Mount Merrion Avenue and even its garden. It looks a little forlorn surrounded by the houses of the estate named Merrion Park.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Photographs are courtesy of Nevil Shute Norway Foundation and Michael Hannan.

SOURCES:

The Sinn Féin Rebellion as They Saw It, edited and introduced by Keith Jeffrey (1999).
Nevil Shute, *Slide Rule: The Autobiography of an Engineer* (1954).

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