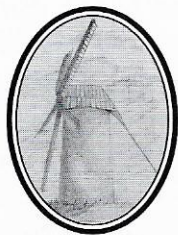


# *Time & Tide*

*Volume*

*-4-*



PUBLISHED BY

*Sherries Historical Society*

*Cover Photograph*

Schooners, Skerries Harbour c.1900 SKERRIES HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVE

*Back Cover*

Postcard sent by Lousia Kelly (1869-1940) Strand Street, Skerries to her nephew Christopher Kelly in Hoboken, New Jersey, USA. Descendents of the Kelly family are still to be found in Hoboken and in other parts of the USA.

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Thomas Hand

Thomas and Rose Hand



# *Thomas Hand*

*1878 – 1920*

*Irish Volunteer*

FRANCIS WHEARITY

2001

Thomas Hand grew up in Baltrasna, midway between Skerries and Balbriggan at a place called the Hills. As a boy he went to Grange National School and left at the age of fourteen years to work as a labourer on the land. In later years he became interested in all things Irish and joined the Gaelic League and later the Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B). He learned to speak the Irish language and became deeply involved in the Irish Volunteers and Sinn Féin IRA. In 1910 he married Rose Coleman and they had five children in the following years. He was captured and imprisoned by British forces in 1916 and was released later. He was very involved in the local community and was secretary of the Irish National Foresters. He was also secretary of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (I.T.G.W.U) and was involved in Sinn Féin courts as a judge. In 1920 he was captured by Black and Tans and killed in cold blood. Around 1929, a street was named in his memory; 'Thomas Hand Street' which runs from the Monument to the old National School on the Dublin Road. There is also a stone memorial to John McGowan, John Sherlock and Thomas Hand in Holmpatrick Cemetery. His eldest son Patrick, who lived on the Dublin Road, wrote a tribute to his father for publication in a booklet for the Skerries Development and Community Association as follows in 1982.<sup>1</sup>

*When I was asked to write a word or two about the man whose name has been given to that piece of road from the National School on the*

*Dublin Road to the Monument in Strand Street, I didn't know where to start. For that reason this is just a small attempt to describe that man, Thomas Hand.*

*When a branch of the Gaelic League was founded in the town early in this century, he played a cheerful and zealous part in it. He was very active in the ITGWU and spent some time as secretary of the branch. In the volunteers and the 'Fingal Brigade' he showed the energy and spirit that attracted the evil eye of the forces of English law. After 1916 he was one of the group of Irishmen who was arrested and jailed in Frongoch prison Wales. After he was released about May 1917 he continued to be so active in every Irish movement that he became a marked man. For that reason it is not surprising that the Black and Tans pursued him when they were given free rein in this country. That was why he was an 'exile' from his house and from his family. 'On the run' is what such activities were called at that time. For some months before his murder he passed his whole life spending nights in different houses in the neighbourhood.*

*His brother Charles and his two sisters gave an account of what happened on the night of the 5th December 1920 at his house in Baltrasna. Charles went to bed at midnight. Before he fell asleep he heard Thomas coming in. About 1.30 on Sunday morning he was awakened by a shattering of the door of the house. Glancing at Thomas's bed he saw that Thomas wasn't there. Before Charles had time to get up the room was full of men, all but one of them in uniform. He was grilled. During the questioning he heard some shots. When he was given a chance to put on his clothes and to go out to the back of the house he found Thomas lying in a pool of blood below a window with bullet-holes in his head and chest.*

*Some years after that, through the efforts of the people of Skerries, the street was named in his honour.*

Thomas was born in Baltrasna, Skerries on June 17th 1878 and was baptised on June 20th, his godparents were Carlos Brien and Jane Brien. Thomas's parents were Patrick Hand and Maria Farrell. Patrick Hand was born in 1840 in Baltrasna and Maria Farrell was born in 1854 in Bohill, Balbriggan. Thomas was the fourth child in a family of twelve, who were born between the years 1873 and 1900.

The family consisted of nine daughters and three sons, who are as follows in order of birth.<sup>2</sup>

ANNIE *September 10th 1873*

CHARLES *April 3rd 1875*

JANE *February 1st 1877*

THOMÁS *June 17th 1878*

FRANCES *April 9th 1881*

MARY HELENA *September 5th 1883*

PATRICK *March 18th 1886*

ELIZABETH *July 3rd 1888*

CATHERINE *October 4th 1890*

ALICE *September 11th 1893*

BRIDGET *April 6th 1896*

ROSANNA *March 22nd 1900*

All the above plus the father and mother lived in a small three - roomed thatched cottage down Baltrasna lane although the older children would have moved out before the younger ones came along. Although the family was a large one by today's standard, its size was nothing unusual at that time. The house was small but it occupied a large open site of about one acre, on the seaward side of Barnageera hill, with panoramic views over the town of Skerries and the sea and coastline as far as the Mourne mountains.

Thomas started his education at Grange National School at the age of five years, and is registered on the school roll book in 1886 as being in third class and aged eight years on last birthday. His teacher in the Grange was Mrs Reilly. The Grange National School<sup>3</sup> closed down in 1903 but by this time Thomas would have completed his primary education.



Job opportunities were few in those years and it was mostly only labouring work that was available to a young lad of fourteen or fifteen years just after leaving school, so it is likely that he went to work on the land like his father did.

The 1901 Census,<sup>4</sup> shows Thomas, still living at home with his parents in Baltrasna, sharing the home with his two brothers, Charles, Patrick and six sisters, Mary, Elizabeth, Katie, Alice, Bridget and Rose. His age is given as 22 years and his employment as general labourer like his father Patrick. In 1887, Charles had a leg amputated at the tender age of twelve years, causing him to spend the rest of his life as a cripple and severely compromising his prospects in life, in relation to employment and his ability to support a wife and children. In any event he did not marry. His brother Patrick suffered a fatal accident in 1904 when the draw-bar of a farm machine on which he was sitting broke and the machine ran over him. He was only 18 years old.

The girls still living at home were all of school going age except Mary, who was 17 years old. Three of the older sisters had already left home to work in domestic service. Frances went to work for the Eason family in Dalkey, Co. Dublin. These were the people who owned the bookshop on O'Connell Street. She was very happy there. Jane went to be a housekeeper for a priest who lived on Berkeley Road, Dublin. Annie was a cook in Smarmore Castle, County Meath, owned by the Taffee family. She was a very good cook and in later years returned to Skerries and opened a shop on Strand Street doing teas, dinners and baking cakes and buns. Roseanna went to Texas, U.S.A to become a nun. But later in her twenties she got cancer and was sent home. She lived and worked with Annie until she died in 1950. Bridget Hand and William Andrews from the Naul married in Skerries in 1924 and they lived the rest of their lives in Balrothery.<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Hand and Rose Coleman were married in Skerries on 5 October 1910. Canon Dolan PP performed the ceremony and the witnesses were Philip McCormack and Teresa O'Brien. Rose



Coleman had been born in Piercetown, Skerries on 17th September 1875.<sup>6</sup> The couple set up home at 165 Strand Street, Skerries, opposite where the Home Stores is now. They lived there for about one year. Hardly any information about their marriage survives today. I have been unable to find anyone who remembers the wedding. In those years weddings were less formal than now, people got married in the afternoon, then they went for family celebrations and there was unlikely to have been a honeymoon holiday.

The Census of 1911<sup>7</sup> shows Thomas and Rose living at number 165 and their ages as 32 years for him and 34 years for her. Under the heading of *languages*, Thomas had Irish and English, and was proficient in Irish so his study in the Gaelic League was worthwhile. Under the heading of *employment* we see that he was working as a van driver for Landy's Bakery in Convent Lane. Information taken from a letter written by Rose Hand in 1953;<sup>8</sup> informs us that her husband worked for the bakery up until the death of the proprietor Vincent Landy. So in light of this and the fact that Mr. Landy died in April 1917, also that the census shows Thomas working as a bread delivery salesman we can be certain that he was employed by Landy's for at least 6 years. On 26 June 1911, Thomas's father, Patrick, died at the age of 70 years and was buried in Baldungan cemetery.

Rose Hand gave birth to her first baby, Patrick, on 14 November 1911. Nurse Sommers, who lived in Strand Street, attended Mrs Hand at the birth. He was baptised on 16 November by Fr John Hickey. The witnesses were Christopher Dowdall and Teresa O'Brien.<sup>9</sup> (Patrick married Anne Carey on 29 September 1941.)

In 1912 the family moved home to a cottage near the quarry in Milverton. Rose became pregnant again in the Spring of that year and sought the services of the nurse who assisted her during her first pregnancy and in whom she had the utmost confidence. Nurse Sommers was a popular nurse in the town, her religion was Protestant and it was this that was to cause some difficulty for Thomas and Rose with their own Catholic clergy. On hearing the news of her pregnancy and that she had engaged the services of

Nurse Sommers, the parish priest Canon Dolan was not too pleased and sent his curate Father Russell to talk to her. He asked her to cancel the appointment of the nurse in favour of a Catholic nurse. However Rose would not comply with Canon Dolan's request as she took the view that it was her right to choose who would help her in her confinement and as she had availed of the services of the nurse before and had every confidence in her ability, she saw no good reason to alter the arrangements.<sup>10</sup>

So when the baby was due and Nurse Sommers took up her duty and delivered a beautiful baby girl on 24 November 1912, all seemed well. However, all was not well when it came to the time to have baby Elizabeth christened; there was trouble brewing and problems were to arise with getting the baby baptised, this led to an angry exchange of words between Thomas Hand and Canon Dolan. When there was no satisfactory outcome from these talks, Thomas wrote to the Archbishop of Dublin, William Walsh.<sup>11</sup> Thus an exchange of letters took place between the parties.

Milverton, Skerries, Co. Dublin.

1 December 1912

*To His Grace the Lord Archbishop of Dublin.*

*My Lord Archbishop,*

*It is with great reluctance that I am compelled to acquaint you of the intolerable manner my wife and I have been treated by our clergy. On Tuesday last week Fr. Russell was sent by Canon Dolan with the message to my wife saying the Canon had heard she would be shortly confined and that she had engaged a Protestant nurse and requesting her to cancel the engagement. This she would not comply with and told Fr. Russell she had a right to have her own choice on a matter of so much importance to herself.*

*Your Grace will readily understand why my wife was so anxious to*

have the same nurse as had attended her on a previous occasion. The child was born on Sunday last and on Wednesday eve I went to Fr. Russell and told him the child would be in the Church for baptism at noon the following day, which is one of the two days of the week on which baptism is administered. His answer to me was – bring the child in the evening when it is dark and no one will see it. Your grace can well imagine how hurt my feelings at receiving such an insult from a catholic priest. My answer to him was, that I would do no such thing, but that I would have the infant in the Church at the proper time next day.

The Sponsors with the child were according in the church at noon on Thursday, and I got there at one o'clock. Finding that Fr. Russell had not turned up I decided to take my child home, but before doing so however I acquainted Canon Dolan, but he did not take any action on the matter. I went home and I need hardly tell Your Grace of the unhappy state of my feelings or of the shock it occasioned my wife when I related the dishonourable way we had been treated.

The same evening Fr. Russell's servant girl came to my house and wanted to know if I would take the child in the dark that evening for baptism. This was a renewal of the insult and I flatly refused to agree to such a degrading proceeding, and the child remains unbaptised.

These are the facts in connection with this deplorable occurrence and to which I am prepared to testify on oath should Your Grace so desire. I therefore respectfully ask Your Grace to investigate the matter, the result of which I will be pleased to know as soon as possible.

Believe Me,  
My Lord Bishop

Yours Truly,  
Thomas Hand



LETTER FROM THE ARCHBISHOP OF DUBLIN TO THOMAS HAND

4 December 1912

Dear Sir,

*I have been able to investigate to some extent the matter about which you have written to me. About one point in the case there would seem to be some misunderstanding and in reference to the case generally I may observe that I am not in a position, as you seem to think that I am; to hold a sworn inquiry into it.*

*The matter of pressing importance is the baptism of the child. I hardly like to contemplate the possibility of the Childs' being as yet unbaptised, but if baptism has not yet been administered you should have the child brought to the church after previously arranging with the priest on duty to have it baptised without further delay. You can say, if you wish that you have written to me and that it is by my directions that you have taken this course.*

*I am, dear sir, your faithful servant,*

*William Walsh*

ARCHBISHOP OF DUBLIN

*P.S. Of course it is my direction that the child is to be baptised in the ordinary way, within whatever hours are usual for baptisms in the parish.*

*I anticipate no further difficulty, but if any should arise, you may kindly let me know about it at once.*

*W. F. Walsh.*<sup>12</sup>

Subsequently Elizabeth was christened on 5 December 1912. The witnesses were Francis Murray and Bridget Hand. The priest was Fr John Hickey. Written on the baptismal certificate were the words *SUB CONDITIOE BAPTIZATA*. This would seem to bring an end to the matter but it remains to be seen why the parish priest was so against Nurse Sommers in the first place. Was it because she was a



Protestant nurse assisting at a Catholic birth or had he harboured some ill feeling toward Hand because of his involvement in the Gaelic League for example? Canon Dolan's views may become more plain after we read a piece from the paper 'An Claidheamh Solas'<sup>13</sup> dated 23 August 1902. From reading what the Rev Father has to say it appears clear that his views were very anti Gaelic League or any member of that organisation and Thomas Hand was a very active member and may have been picked on by Father Dolan with regard to the christening or maybe not, we shall have to make up our own minds on the matter. (Elizabeth married Alex McKenna on 31 July 1943.)

Baldungan, Skerries, 14 August 1902

*To the editor of An Claidheamh Solas*

*Dear Sir,*

*There was an AERIDHEACHT held at Skerries on Sunday 13 July by a joint committee of the CRAOBH NA MUINNTIRE, Balcunnin, Skerries and Lusk branches of the Gaelic League. The AERIDHEACHT consisted of a hurling match, Irish songs and dances and a short address by the Reverend Father Anderson O.S.A and members of the executive committee of the Gaelic League. The AERIDHEACHT was enthusiastically received by the people. The following Sunday 20 July 1902, Rev. Father Dolan P.P Skerries, took occasion from the altar to criticise the AREIDHEACHT and its promoters in a manner which proves him to be entirely antagonistic to Irish Ireland. He warned his congregation against having anything to do with such entertainment, and said they were calculated to lead them eventually to the police courts and that such entertainments were frequently the scenes of rowdyism and drunkenness.*

*To prove this, he read an extract from a daily paper concerning a quarrel that occurred at a Gaelic tournament near Athlone. Rev. Father Dolan gave it as his opinion that the promoters of AERIDHEACHTS would in a short time be all transported. The committee in charge of the*

*AREIDHEACHT* wrote to *Father Dolan*, politely asking him to withdraw his words and waited a fortnight for a reply, but received none. They also wrote to the Bishop of the diocese *Doctor Walsh* and waited for a week for a reply, with the same result as in the previous case.

*I shall feel obliged if you will give the matter as much publicity as possible, as the words of Father Dolan have left a wrong impression on the minds of the people of Skerries and district concerning the league and its objects, particularly as the principals of the Gaelic League are little known to the majority of the people who receive everything the priest says with implicit faith.*

*However, as your paper is well known amongst Gaelic Leaguers of the town, I expect this publication will have the desired effect.*

*I am Sir, yours faithfully,*  
S.O/ DROIGNEAN

Thomas was involved in another organisation for which he was secretary of the local branch. This was the Skerries branch of the Irish National Foresters, known as the Dr Grimley branch No. 414. We know that he worked as secretary of the Foresters from 1912 until at least 1918 and no doubt would have been involved in another capacity before 1912. The evidence of his involvement is contained in a Minute book<sup>14</sup> of the branch which survived the passing years and was presented to Skerries Historical Society's Archives by Tomás Hand of Hacketstown Road, Skerries, and which was gratefully received. The book was diligently written up on a weekly basis from 1912 to 1918 by the secretary Thomas Hand except for the time after he was arrested and imprisoned.

At this point I would like to bring forward some material from a file held in the Military archives in Cathal Brugha Barracks in Rathmines Dublin. It contains a submission made by Mrs Rose Hand in 1953-1954 period in relation to her husband's death and of particular reference to us are the letters of testimony of his commanding officer in the Fingal Brigade and a letter from his

friend Matt Derham, Church Street, who was also in the Fingal brigade. The name of the commanding officer was Matthew Bissett, Baltrasna, Skerries. These two letters offer us a wealth of valuable information about Thomas Hand's activities in those years and we are indebted to the two gentlemen who wrote the letters.<sup>15</sup> Material from the above will be used as necessary throughout the following pages as the chronological story unfolds.

REGARDING CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE OF THOMAS HAND  
(DECEASED) SKERRIES.

*To Whom It May Concern.*

*I certify that Thomas Hand was a member of the Irish Volunteers, Skerries unit. From their inception in 1913-1914. He was one of a small minority that voted for the provisional committee at a meeting held in the Bandroom, Skerries at the time of the Redmondite split. Subsequently he attended meetings and drills in selected quarries in the area at which I as a young man attended. He was arrested in the general round up by British forces after the 1916 Easter Rising and deported to England. (sv Times, history of the rising).*

*He served with me on various committees, notably the ANTI-CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN. He joined the volunteers and as a secretary of the local labour union, I.T.G.W.U (Irish Transport and General Workers Union). He marshalled the workers to the side of the active forces. As a member of the I.R.A (Irish Republican Army) I vouch that he was in confidence and to the best of my recollection he was readmitted and excused active service on account of his age and as a key to the continuity of the organisation, in the area in the event of hostilities breaking out. This being the policy at the time.*

*During the BLACK AND TAN regime he successfully evaded arrest and went on the run. During this period he was one of our party under arms at the farmyard of Mr Fox (SEAMOUNT) and I regarded him as an attachment to my Corp. Unfortunately on the night of his murder by Crown forces he availed of shelter at the house of his sister at Baltrasna*



*Lane for apparently the reason of convenience of attending mass next morning. This was only a few yards from where we slept. I learned of his death next morning, I visited the spot and viewed the body.*

UNIT C COY SKERRIES.

1st Battalion.

8th Fingal Brigade.

Signed M.Bissett (Captain) Retired.

Late of Coy I.R.A Skerries.

Home address: 85 Strand Road, Sandymount, Dublin.

December 1953

*To Whom It May Concern, regarding Thomas Hand.*

*This is to certify that the late Thomas Hand was a personal friend of mine. He was a co-worker in the Gaelic League and G.A.A movement from 1907 onwards and when the Irish Volunteers were formed in Skerries he was one of the committee that helped to form the Skerries Corp in Rush and Balbriggan. During his early Gaelic league years he worked hard and studied so diligently that he was capable of teaching the language and also Irish dancing.*

*Thomas Hand was present at the Howth gun-running and after the split he took the side of the Irish Volunteers (after Redmondite). Prior to 1916 he was a member of the I.R.B (Irish Republican Brotherhood) and later a member of the I.R.A (Irish Republican Army). Hand answered the call to arms on Easter Sunday 1916 and he was on duty at Rathbeal Cross, Saucerstown, Swords, Frank Lawless (estate) until the dismiss on early Monday morning. Owing to the confusion of the following day, the extraordinary reports of the happenings, Hand did not rejoin his unit, but through no fault of his own, He was rounded up after the Rising and deported to England but was released later on.*

*Thomas was a great worker in the Sinn Féin courts and when the Republican courts were set up, he was elected as one of the Judges and acted in that capacity during all the sittings of the courts. After the sack*



*of Balbriggan in September 1920 things got so hot around Skerries and district, Hand had to go on the run. He was tracked to his brother's house in Baltrasna, the Hills, on the night of 5th December 1920 and brutally murdered by the Black and Tans.*

*Thomas was a most consistent worker in every cause for the country and peoples rights. He arranged the labour movement in Skerries and district and put it on a sound footing. He also did solid work in the ANTI-CONSCRIPTION campaign. His widow Mrs Rose Hand was also a great worker in every movement fore-mentioned. I strongly appeal to you to give this cause (case) every consideration and also allow Mrs Hand her full quota.*

*Signed MATT DERHAM, ST BRENDANS, CHURCH ST, SKERRIES.*

Thomas Hand was a member of a committee set up to form a Skerries Coy. of Volunteers and helped in the setting up of branches in Rush and Balbriggan. A meeting was held in Skerries at the Square to try to recruit new members. A volunteer was put on parade in uniform to show the gathering what one should look like when kitted out. The outfit consisted of a green military type cap, a leather bandolier and a canvas haversack both worn across the shoulder with a leather belt. Soon after, enrolment took place and possibly thirty men and youths signed up. Thus, the Skerries Volunteer Coy.<sup>16</sup> was set up and Hand played an active part in it.

Rose Hand gave birth to a son on 17 January 1914 in Milverton. This was their second son Tomás and he was baptised the following day by Fr John Hickey, the witnesses being James Thornton and Margaret Murray.<sup>17</sup> (Tomás married Patricia O'Shea of Waterford, on 4 November 1947, in Skerries.)

Leading up to the time that the arms shipment was landed at Howth, it became usual for volunteers to march to the harbour there on Sundays and return to Fairview to be dispersed. This regular occurrence took place to accustom the authorities to expect the marches and to see nothing unusual in these Sunday outings. That is what the volunteer leaders wanted and hoped that repetition of

the marching would leave the way clear on the day when the arms would arrive. The fateful day was Sunday 26 July 1914, the *Asgard* sailed into the harbour at Howth, 1500 rifles and 45000 rounds of ammunition were safely landed ashore and quickly taken away in the possession of the volunteers. The ammunition was kept separately, so even though many men got a rifle they did not get any bullets to fire with. This was deliberate so as to conserve the limited supply of ammunition.

The Skerries Volunteers took part in these manoeuvres and Matt Derham's letter tells us that Thomas Hand was involved and he and other Skerries men were fortunate and got Howth rifles. The late Paddy Halpin is quoted from archive records as remembering that volunteers from Skerries reached home later that day bearing their arms proudly. Mr Halpin, then a very young boy, clearly recalls seeing a group making their way home along Dublin Street carrying their rifles. Each rifle had to be paid for and was not a gift as might be expected. The men had a choice of paying in full or on a weekly basis. It seems that they were happy to comply with this as they realised the necessity of returning the money to the fund in case of it being needed again. The guns were German Mauser<sup>18</sup> (old type), the sort used to good effect by the Boers in the war with the British army but by then (1914) regarded as obsolete. The rifles were single shot, bolt action and with a cleaning rod fitted under the barrel. They were also very heavy and one would need to be physically fit to be able to lug one around all day. Also being single shot meant that you had to be sure of the target before you pulled the trigger or you might not get a second chance.

In August, war was declared between Britain and Germany and this was seen by the leaders of the I.R.B as a golden opportunity to capitalise on Britain's distress and to use it to strike a blow for freedom in Ireland. The feeling being that the British would not have the same interest nor could they spare the necessary soldiers and weaponry to keep down any major sustained assault on their positions in this country. How this situation was to come about was



another matter entirely. After the start of the war the British government looked to Ireland to support her and also expected that Irish men would flock to join her army and navy in the battle with Germany. John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party called on all able-bodied men to come forward and enlist to fight on Britain's side and when the war was won she might look on Ireland's claims for more self government in a more generous way. Redmond's move was a severe blow to the republican cause due to the flood of men who enlisted; about one hundred and fifty thousand men answered the call. The so called 'split' came about when men had to decide whether to stay and fight what seemed like a losing battle against the British forces at home or to enlist and go and fight a much bigger battle on the side of the British against the Germans.

Thomas Hand was one of a minority in Skerries who opted to stay true to their republican ideals. At a meeting in the Band room, at the Square, he voted against the Redmond plan, and tried to dissuade others from off to fight. The desire to go was very strong in many Skerries men. About 100 went, some never to return alive.<sup>19</sup> The Skerries Coy. carried on as before although in a weakened state, due obviously to the reduction in their numbers but those that remained were highly committed people and not easily swayed from their beliefs. They continued to meet secretly at various places locally, to hold meetings and to carry out training exercises. Drilling is the practice of marching to order, how to carry a rifle and present it in the correct manner according to orders and so on. By these means contact with one's colleagues was maintained and also a disciplined and orderly unit of men could be maintained indefinitely.

Home Rule became law in 1914 but was not accepted by the people because Ulster was given an exemption due to demands by Sir Edward Carson, who was in a very powerful position having under his control an Ulster volunteer force armed to the teeth after the Larne gunrunning. The British government were fearful to go against his wishes, a situation the Irish volunteers in the south could

only look on with envy and amazement. Carson was born in Dublin but was no friend of that city; *'Home rule is Rome rule'* he once famously said.

Thomas and Rose Hand welcomed their fourth child into the world on 19 May 1915, a girl, Mary Teresa (Maura). She was baptised on 23 May by Fr M.E Murphy and the witnesses were John Monks and Mary O'Callaghan.<sup>20</sup> (Maura married Sammy Shiels on 20 November 1944.) On 18 October 1915, Thomas's mother, Maria, passed away at the age of 62 years and was buried in Baldungan cemetery. She had been ill for some time, suffered a heart attack in the morning and died by the evening.

Prior to the 1916 rising, the volunteers of Fingal were organised as the fifth battalion of the Dublin Brigade, located at Swords, Lusk, Skerries and St Margarets. Each Coy. had a nominal roll of about thirty men but was usually understrength in numbers. Some weeks before the rising, Thomas Ashe of Lusk assumed the command of the battalion, in succession to Dr R. Hayes who became battalion adjutant. The Skerries unit was known as C COMPANY, 1st BATTALION, 8th FINGAL BRIGADE<sup>21</sup>.

Quoting from the letter of Matt Derham,<sup>22</sup> he writes that Thomas Hand answered the call to arms on Easter Sunday 23 April 1916 and he was on duty at Rathbeal Cross, Swords until the dismiss on early Monday morning. Owing to the confusion of the following day, the extraordinary reports of the happenings, Hand did not rejoin his unit through no fault of his own. Guns, ammunition and explosives were taken to Saucerstown on the Sunday in the expectation of serious interaction with British forces. The battalion as ordered mobilised at Rathbeal Cross, almost to a man and Hand was one of them. From here the story starts to become a bit confusing. For a start Matt Derham says that the order to dismiss was given early on Monday morning and so the men disbanded on that day. Another report that I have seen states that the official cancellation to disband, appeared in the Sunday newspaper and that would mean that the men would be sent away on the Sunday. So whichever way



it was, the men were dispersed to their homes by whatever transport was at their disposal, usually a bicycle and told to remain on alert for a possible recall at any time. We know from Derham's letter that Hand did not return and so missed out one very serious piece of action for which he had been training and drilling. Yet the letter states that it was not Hand's fault for not rejoining, and in my opinion it must have been a mighty blow to Hand's pride to have missed out. I can only surmise that the message to return did not reach him or at least not in time. Of course he was not the only volunteer to fail to return, as the recall to arms was a confused affair and some men were bitter at their leaders for what they perceived as having been messed about on the Sunday. Anyway events were to unfold and the Fingal Brigade under the command of Thomas Ashe, went on to cause a huge upset over the British forces at the battle of Ashbourne.

During Easter week and the fantastic happenings in Dublin City, the Fingal area was in turmoil. On Tuesday 25 April, the police got word that the Marconi radio station was to be attacked by Fingal Brigade volunteers as the station was poorly protected by only seven soldiers. This news caused panic in the town but proved to be a false alarm. But there was activity going on outside the town; on Wednesday 26 information was received that there was trouble in Swords and Donabate and of an attempt to blow up the bridge at Rogerstown, which partially failed due to lack of dynamite. The fear of Skerries being attacked was enough to cause the town leaders to ask the authorities for help to be sent at once. On 27 April martial law was declared and a curfew imposed in Dublin and county between the hours of 7.30pm-5.30am. At the end of Easter week the British military authorities in Ireland were in a state of high agitation and fearful of further trouble, so extra troops were drafted in to quell any such trouble. The request for help for Skerries was acceded to and on Wednesday a war ship anchored just off the harbour and about two hundred soldiers were landed by rowing boat on to the pier and marched to take up positions on all routes in or out of the town. These were men of the North Staffordshire

regiment, led by Captain Clay.<sup>23</sup> They quickly took up positions around the town and commandeered Derham's red shed on the Golf Road (where the entrance to Shenick is now). This shed was their base in Skerries and Captain Clay commandeered it for the purpose. Local blacksmiths, Willie Manning and Willie Carton were requisitioned to make alterations to the structure in order to make it into a kind of fortress. The town was turned into a controlled area with a pass being required to enter or leave and a curfew imposed at night.<sup>24</sup>

It was under these conditions that the North Staffordshires were shortly to begin rounding up and arresting local men whom they suspected of being volunteers or helping volunteers. These arrests were made under the new act, passed in 1914, *The Defence of the Realm Act number 14B*. The number of men arrested is noted at about twenty and Hand was among them. They were lifted over some days and held in Derham's red shed before being sent to Dublin.<sup>25</sup> Thomas was sent to Arbour Hill prison and held there before he was shipped to Britain and records have him being received at Wakefield prison, North Yorkshire on 6 May 1916.

Exact dates when Thomas was arrested are not available at this time, but we know that he was received at Wakefield prison in North Yorkshire on 6 May and if we work back from there to see the likely dates, allowing about two days for the sea journey and train travel, it would put him at Arbour Hill on or about 4 May, a likely date for his departure to England. Referring back to the minute book of the Foresters, we know that Thomas was secretary and meetings were held once a week. From the minutes of the 29 April we know that a meeting took place as usual and that brother Bernard Moles was appointed secretary in the absence of Thomas Hand, who had been arrested during the week.<sup>26</sup> The minutes of the previous week show Thomas acting as secretary, so it is clear that he was arrested sometime between 22 and 29 April 1916. It would seem therefore that he was not held in Arbour Hill for very long before being sent to Britain, possibly one week.

Rose Hand received letters from Thomas; three that we have copies of, one of which has a date and two of which are written on official military paper.<sup>27</sup> On one letter, the date is the 23 May and the other two bear no dates and one no heading either. His address there is given as:

REG no. 459 (C), Thomas Hand, Irish Prisoner, Wakefield, c/o Chief Postal Censor, London.

LETTER SENT ON 23 MAY 1916

*Dear Wife, I have just got the address for you to write to so I am sending this letter in the belief that you have received my letter and that your reply is on its way here. I hope that you and the children are real well and that you are not worrying about me. I am in the best of health and spirits as are all the boys. Mr Ganly stands the prison well, if old in years he is as young in spirits as any of the men. I had a parcel from Alice. Send me a needle, thread and buttons please.*

*Your fond husband Thomas*

SECOND LETTER *not dated*

REG no. 459 (C), Thomas Hand, Irish Prisoner, Wakefield, c/o Chief Postal Censor, London.

*Dear Wife, hope you are well, as for myself, I am quite well and in good cheer and looking forward to the brighter days. All the boys from Skerries are here. You need not send anything to me, but address your reply just as the address is on top of the page. I will finish now, asking you to keep up and say a prayer for your ever-loving husband Tom.*

On the third letter there is no heading or date so its place of origin and date must remain uncertain, but details in the wording of the letter tell us that he has just got permission to write home and another line states that he has not been to mass since he left Ireland.<sup>28</sup> So I believe that this letter came from Wakefield prison also.



*Dear Wife, I have got permission to write home, it has been a long wait. How are you and the children, yourself in particular, if I knew you were in good heart I would be content. How are the children, tell Paddy to say a prayer for the daddy. Is Thomas as \_\_\_\_\_ as ever? I suppose Mary will soon be walking. How is the granny and auntie. I suppose there was consternation after my arrest, did you get in trouble after my arrest and are you getting any support from any quarter, if not you should apply to \_\_\_\_\_ for support. Who is in my job? Did Sherlock get home? Someone sent me a parcel, which was not let in. Annie sent a parcel yesterday. There is no use sending anything here except changes of clothes.*

*My money is lasting fairly well, it is not all spent just yet. I am tied to one letter a week, so you will have to make some arrangement to let one of them know and so that she can tell the others. I suppose you are bothered with questions from the children, it is hard not to answer them, but cheer up, we will laugh over this yet.*

Some of the wording in this letter is difficult to make out, as it is written using pencil and has faded since 1916. An extra piece scribbled in the margin states as follows; *Post me my beads and scapulars. The only consolations we have are the rosary and have not been to mass since we left Ireland.*

So, Thomas had been held in Wakefield from 6 May to 23 May, at least seventeen days and then he was taken to Frongoch prison. This prison was opened for Irish prisoners on 9 June. It was a converted whiskey distillery in an isolated area of North Wales near a village called Bala. The village had a rail link with other parts of the country, so political prisoners could be sent here from all over Britain. Also, because of its isolation any prisoner lucky enough to escape had nowhere to go as the only way out was rail or road and both were easily guarded by police. Frongoch jail had previously been used to hold German prisoners of war but they were moved elsewhere so that Irish political prisoners could be imprisoned well away from Ireland and the political scene there in the hope that

they could not have any influence on events at home. This was not to be the case however, as Frongoch was to become known as the 'University of Frongoch' because of the way that knowledge was passed around between the men, and contacts were made between people who otherwise would never have met as they were from all over Ireland. These links were to prove invaluable after release and return home.<sup>29</sup>

#### LETTERS FROM FRONGOCH

Number 147 Thomas Hand, Frongoch, Internment Camp, Bala, North Wales. Date 18/6/16.

*Dear Wife,*

*Just a line hoping the children are well and you also as this leaves me. I wrote to you from here last Sunday but have not received a reply. I hope you received it. We cannot write more than one letter weekly. I had a parcel from Jannie White; it came here from Wakefield also a parcel from Alice. Lizzie wrote to me saying she sent a parcel, it has not come yet. I had a letter from Annie, she is sending a parcel every week and wants to know if I want anything, only some bread and some cheese if she could get it. You don't need to send a parcel as it will save postage, as you have to let the girls know how I am, tell them not to send stamps or paper as no Irish papers are allowed in here. We are allowed all the letters sent to us. Bridget wrote to me and told me that Paddy would not stay with them, you should try him again. We have a good time here, have control of the camp, our own cooks and postmen and several committees who manage all the affairs of the camp. We are up at 6 o'clock in the morning and out until 8 p.m in the evening, then we go to bed at ten o'clock. The weather here is lovely; there are nearly 400 men and more coming.*

*I hope your health is good, the granny, Jer and Peter.*

*Love Tom*

Number 147 Thomas Hand, Frongoch, Internment Camp, Bala, North Wales. No date on letter.

*Dear Wife,*

*Just a line hoping to find you and the children well, as for myself I am in the best of health and spirits. Your letters must be going astray, as I have not received a reply to my last two letters. I hope there is nothing wrong? Tell Annie her cakes (oaten) are lovely. We are permitted to write two letters a week, I will write to Janie this week. All the boys are here except Joseph Thornton and J Derham.*

*Your fond husband,*

*Tom*

*This seems to be an extra piece to the letter . . . There is no use in sending writing paper, as we are not let use it. Send Annie my no. as she is using a wrong no. the parcels are coming all right. There is a full crowd here now, over 1000 men now. How is granny? I suppose she thinks she will never see me again? Did you get Paddy to stay with Bridget yet? I suppose they will not know me when I get home?*

*From your husband,*

*Tom*

From reading Thomas' letters sent home to his wife Rose we can see that he is now in Frongoch prison and all the moving about is over. He appears to be reasonably happy there and resigned to the fact that he will be there for an unknown period of time. He writes home inquiring of his family's health and financial situation, telling his wife that if she is not receiving help then she should contact someone, but unfortunately the letter is faded and that wording is not legible. He says of the weather, it is wonderful, probably the time of the year played a large part in that. He was enjoying plenty of access to the fresh air out doors, which would be in contrast with



Wakefield prison and Arbour Hill as these were more conventional prisons and Frongoch was run as a prisoner of war camp even though the British refused to concede prisoner of war status on the Irish prisoners. Thomas was able to receive all the post that was sent to him and plenty was. His sisters sent him parcels on a regular basis and Annie's oaten buns were well liked. So a sort of a routine was established in his daily life and he was among his own sort of people and they had lots of different ways of passing the time. Frongoch was not the worst place. The food in Frongoch was poor if not in quantity then in quality.

#### FOOD RATIONS IN FRONGOCH:

- Meat 8ozs per day including sinew (meat usually frozen New Zealand beef or mutton)
- Potatoes 6ozs per day of poor quality, very inferior to the usual type of potato they would expect at home.
- Bread 6ozs per day and also bad quality
- Margarine 1oz per day
- Milk one small tin of condensed per twenty men per day
- Vegetables 2ozs preserved per day
- Herrings on Friday only, one fish per man, often refused by them as being inedible.

Due to the diet being insufficient in what is needed to maintain long-term health, it was common for prisoners to develop skin diseases and scabies was common among prisoners who were held there for a longer period of time especially over winter. As the summer progressed and prisoner numbers increased from 400 to 1000 men, naturally, individual space decreased and men were packed into airless wooden huts with a complete absence of privacy.

This was Thomas's lot and it was not easy. We also should spare a thought for his wife Rose at home with four children to care for between the ages of five years and one year old, and for good measure she was carrying her fifth baby. She had been on her own

since the end of April when her husband was taken away and with him gone there was no wage coming in to support the family. She must have been in a bad way for money and things must have seemed very bleak indeed. But help was forthcoming from the Irish National Foresters, Skerries branch, (Dr Grimley no. 414) and the minutes of the meeting of the 13 May 1916 states that a proposal by brother John Murray (junior) and seconded by brother N. Devine, to the effect that the wife of brother Thomas Hand should get a distress grant of the amount of ten shillings and seven pennies a week. The motion was passed unanimously.

Mrs Hand gratefully received this money and further payments were made to her on later dates. On 20 May a similar amount was paid as well as on 27 May and 3 June. The dates in June are a mystery because of missing pages in the forester's minute book. The next entry in the book was 1 July when the committee received a letter from Mrs Hand to the effect that she wished to thank them for their generosity to her and her children and for their support during this time of difficulty. She went on to make it known to them that as she was now receiving benefit from the National Aid and White Cross Fund, she would have no need for further grants from the branch. So it would appear that on the money front at least, things were now under some kind of control, one less problem to worry over.

The Irish National Aid and Volunteers Fund was one of the most important factors in channelling the awakening sympathy for and understanding of the aspirations of the leaders of the 1916 rising, into productive activity on behalf of the many left poor and destitute after the rising and those families left behind when their partners were imprisoned.<sup>30</sup> The idea was that a fund would be built up from those who were sympathetic to the cause but who may not be either able or willing to get involved at a deeper level and their contributions would be used as a type of insurance for those people outlined above. Bulmer Hobson, first mooted the idea for the scheme in his booklet *Defensive Warfare*, (Belfast 1909).<sup>31</sup>

At the meeting of the Foresters for 8 July 1916, an instruction was

given to the treasurer to handle a matter normally done by the secretary and the minute's state "in the absence of brother Hand now detained in Frongoch, North Wales". The meeting of 15 July 1916: as it was expected that brother Hand would be released in the coming week there was no proposal to appoint a secretary to the branch. The meeting of 22 July 1916: brother Hand appears to be signing the minutes again so it seems that he had returned before that date.

So now we have two inclusive dates, he was gone before 29 April and back before 22 July, a period just short of three months.

Thomas was released on the 21 July 1916,<sup>32</sup> a Friday evening at 8 o'clock and sent by train, third class from Bala to Holyhead to catch the over night mail boat to Dublin. A directive sent to the governors of prisons holding Irish political prisoners, from the secretary of State to the effect that.

*Sir I am directed to inform you to issue rail warrants (3rd Class) to released prisoners, to get them to their destinations (home). They are also to be supplied with one day's ration or money in lieu of. Men should not be sent by the North Wall route to Dublin, nor should they be sent by boat that arrives in Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) in the evening, only that which arrives in the morning. This is to make it less likely that crowds of people would be about and so the likelihood of disturbance in the port or the city was reduced. No man shall leave prison wearing a Sinn Féin badge or uniform and if necessary he may be issued with civilian clothing. He should be informed of his release by order of the secretary of state, under the terms of the Defence of the Realm Act 14b and is set free. Any man living outside Dublin must not delay in the city, but must pass through quickly. A medical certificate of fitness to travel must be signed by the prison doctor prior to release.<sup>33</sup>*

Thomas arrived home to his wife and children with Rose Hand carrying their fifth child in the final weeks of her pregnancy. They picked themselves up and carried on as best they could. Thomas attended a committee meeting of the Foresters on Saturday 22 July,



according to the minute book and seeing that he was only discharged the evening before, it would seem that he made a very speedy journey and lost no time in taking up his position as secretary again.

Soon after returning home Thomas took up his employment with Landy's bakery and worked there until the death of Vincent Landy in 1917.<sup>34</sup> Rose Hand gave birth to her fifth baby on 22 August 1916 at home in Milverton. The baby girl was christened Anna on the 24 August by Fr Joseph O'Reilly,<sup>35</sup> and the witnesses were Peter Gibbons and Brigid Maguire. The baby was not very strong and lived only about a year; the cause of death is not known.

The Fingal Brigade, after the rising had to try and regroup and pick up the pieces. Their leader Thomas Ashe was in prison and would not be released until the general amnesty in 1917, so it was a time for reflection on what might have been and time to think of where to go from there. On 25 September 1917, Sinn Féin acquired its first martyr since the Easter Rising when Ashe died of clumsily administered forcible feeding, while on hunger strike in Mountjoy jail. He had been arrested for making a speech deemed by the authorities as likely to lead to disaffection among the people. He and about forty other political prisoners had been on hunger strike in a quest to achieve political prisoner status and not be treated as ordinary criminals. At that time these men were treated very harshly; as well as being forced they also had their boots and bedding taken away and were made to lie on the cold stone floor of their cell.<sup>36</sup> The funeral of Ashe was a very big affair; he was hugely popular with the people and thousands lined the streets on the day. All the Volunteer brigades were there including the Fingal Brigade and whether Thomas Hand was in attendance is not known but it is likely that he was there to see off his leader to his grave.

The Fingal Brigade kept a low profile for quite a while after Ashe died, but they were still there and after the disappointment of defeat in 1916, things could only improve. There was a wholesale change

in public opinion towards Sinn Féin and the volunteers. This change of outlook of the people towards the fighters of 1916 was to prove very important over the next few years, as once again it became popular for young men to come forward and join the ranks of Sinn Féin IRA. The British were seen to have acted with undue harshness towards the men of 1916 and treated them as common criminals when in fact they fought bravely and courageously and without thought for themselves but only for the cause of freedom for Ireland. John Redmond, leader of the Nationalist party, died on 6 March, a broken man, let down by the British government and later scorned by the Irish people for having promised so much and delivered so little.

Conscription was a huge issue in 1918 and there was serious concern among the Irish that Britain was no longer satisfied to take those men who volunteered to fight on her side but also wanted to force those who had no desire or even felt revulsion towards having to fight in what they saw as Britain's war. Conscription would of course have taken away the right to refuse. Thomas Hand and Matthew Bissett, (Captain of Skerries Company) served with others on a committee set up against conscription and tried to encourage local people to hold out against it.<sup>37</sup> However on the 6 April 1918 the Military Service Bill went through the House of Commons and conscription seemed to be on the way. The Catholic Hierarchy became involved and came out with a statement: '*We consider that conscription forced in this way upon Ireland is an oppressive and inhuman law which the Irish people have a right to resist by every means that are consistent with the law of God.*' On 21 April a special anti-conscription mass was held nation wide and a collection taken up outside the church gates towards a fighting fund. There was an opportunity to sign a pledge formulated by Eamonn de Valera and over one million people signed the 'Mansion House Pledge', as it was called. On the 23 April 1918, the labour movement staged a one-day national strike against conscription, during which the country virtually shut down, even the pubs stayed closed. The message to Britain was clear;



conscription was not wanted here. On November 11 1918, the war ended and Britain celebrated victory over Germany, and thus the need for Irish men to join the army was not on the same scale as before.

As well as acting on the anti conscription committee in Skerries, Thomas was active in the trade union movement. He was a local secretary for the ITGWU and used his influence in that capacity to encourage workers to support Sinn Féin IRA. At this time he was working in the quarry owned by Dublin County Council at Curkeen. Recorded evidence for this is scarce but we know from the letter of 1953 that Rose Hand wrote in which she states that her husband was working there until his death, and she should know where her husband was going to work each day. The Council cannot find any records of his employment. The ITGWU was the largest union in Ireland at that time and catered for workers in lots of different occupations from farm workers to quarry men to lorry drivers etc.

The idea of the Sinn Féin Courts taking over the administration of justice from the established courts was first mooted in 1919 and took definite shape in early 1920.<sup>38</sup> This trend started first in the west of Ireland, in Mayo, Clare and Galway. The courts continued until 1922 when the provisional government shut them down. According to the letter of Matt Derham, Thomas was a great worker in the Sinn Féin courts and when the Republican Courts were set up, he was elected as one of the judges and acted in that capacity during all the sittings of the courts. So we know that he was involved in the Sinn Féin court system but as these sittings were held in secret I could not find any details of any cases handled by Thomas Hand.

Things were beginning to get a bit stormy on the ground for those fighting the British forces in Ireland. The IRA was again very active all over the country and the Fingal brigade was playing its part. The British government brought in new legislation in order to make it easier for their police and army to arrest those that crossed their path. These laws came under the heading of '*Emergency Laws in*



*Ireland Act 1918-1925*.<sup>39</sup> One of these laws was the *Restoration of Order in Ireland Act*,<sup>40</sup> which became law on 9 August. Under this act, persons could be arrested easily, for example:

Arrests could be made by military personnel as well as by the RIC (Royal Irish Constabulary).

Arrests were authorised even where no specific offence was suspected.

If a specific offence was suspected there was no requirement for reasonableness.

Extended detention for the purpose of investigation of the case against the accused was permitted.

On 18 April 1920, Thomas's sister, Alice, died of tuberculosis, aged twenty-eight years. She was buried in Baldungan cemetery.

Early in 1920 the RIC began to lose members through resignations and the numbers became so large as to eventually force upon the British government the necessity of importing English recruits and thereby altering the whole character of the force. The new English terrorist Corp. consisted of the Black and Tans, the Auxiliary division and the Special Constabulary composed of Protestant Orange men. From the stand-point of social order the grotesque paradox was now seen of police men, for they were all described as such for propaganda purposes, acting as soldiers.<sup>41</sup> The above force was stationed in Gormanston military barracks, north of Balbriggan. How many were there I do not know but they were plentiful. The modus operandi of the Black and Tans was to come out at night, the later the better in order to cause maximum terror to their intended victims. The "Sack of Balbriggan" took place in September 1920 and the Tans were running rampant at that time and people could not sleep easy in their beds due to the worry of an unwelcome visit in the night.

Referring to the letters of Derham and Bissett, which state that after the sack of Balbriggan things got so hot around Skerries and district that Hand had to leave his home and family and go on the run, Matthew Bissett says that "during the Black and Tan regime

Hand successfully evaded arrest and went on the run". The letter also states that during the period Hand was one of a party under arms at the farmyard of Mr Fox (Seamount) and Matthew regarded him as an attachment to his Corp. Those were not the times for keeping a high profile, not if your name was known in connection with any subversive action against the British forces either currently or in the past. So Thomas was forced to keep on the move especially at night and he had to rely on friends and neighbours around the area to give him shelter.<sup>42</sup> That was the way it had to be for the foreseeable future. There would be no going home at the end of the day to the comfort of his own house and the company of his wife and family and a seat by his own fireside and a sleep in his own bed, no, not while the Black and Tans were on the prowl. His only contact with family from now on would be brief moments snatched during daylight hours when the enemy were sleeping. The effect on the children was such that they hardly slept at home during that time and were dispersed to stay with kindly neighbours around.<sup>43</sup>

On the night of the 4 of December 1920, Thomas was in Skerries for the purpose of going to confession. Afterwards he intended to spend the night at his brother's house in Baltrasna Lane. He started on the journey there keeping off the roads as much as possible in order to avoid detection. He would cross the fields, lanes and go along the rail line which he knew so well from having gone that way many times during his lifetime. On that same December day, fifty men were rounded up by British forces in Dublin and were imprisoned. This was the scene all over with men being hunted down like animals and receiving rough treatment when they were caught.

On the morning of 5 December 1920, the Black and Tans called to Hand's home in Milverton and forced entry, as there was no reply to their knocking with rifle butts. They used their bayonets to prise open the door and pushed it in. The house was in darkness as there was no one home, no doubt due to the constant fear of such a visit. They ransacked the house and removed what they could find of any value, including a coat and a bicycle. They then knocked on the



Murphy family next door who were awake as no one could sleep through such commotion. When the door was answered, the Tans rushed in and proceeded to terrorise the family. Peter Murphy could smell alcohol off their breath and knew the danger they were in. He tried to calm things down but the intruders would have none of it and were going to arrest and take him away. The feeling was that the two cottages would be torched and burned to the ground. The threat was averted when Peter Murphy told the Tan in charge that he worked for Woods Estate in Milverton and that his employer would not be too pleased and could cause trouble for them; so they left. Little did the Murphy's know that the Tans had other calls to make and one of these was to Baltrasna Lane where Hand had gone for shelter. Their luck was in that night and they cornered and shot Thomas Hand four times in the head and neck. The story is best revealed by reading the newspaper reports of the following day as they give a vivid account of what took place:

*Irish Times* 6 December 1920.<sup>44</sup>

*'LABOURER SHOT DEAD NEAR SKERRIES'*

*Thomas Hand a quarry labourer was shot in his mother's house at Baltrasna, near Skerries at about 2am yesterday by a party of armed men. He was a married man and until a few weeks ago, he lived with his wife and family in a cottage in the town. But as frequent inquiries were made about him by parties who searched his home, he did not stay there constantly. On Saturday night, having been to confession in the local church, he went to his mother's place for the first time in a fortnight, where he decided to stay for the night. The family were disturbed by the entrance of armed men, who shouted for Hand and in the confusion they dragged his brother, a cripple and were about to shoot him when they realised their mistake. Mean time Thomas endeavoured to escape through a back window but he was shot dead in the attempt in the presence of his terror stricken mother, brother and sisters. He was secretary of the local branch of the*



*transport union and frequently figured as arbitrator of republican courts, while he was an ardent student of Irish. The scene of the murder was about half way between Skerries and Balbriggan on a headland known as the Hills, overlooking the sea. Hand was among the deportees in 1916.*

(The above report contains an error, it states that the mother of Thomas Hand was present in the house on that fateful night, which is incorrect as she had been dead since 1915).

*Irish Independent. 7 December 1920*

#### IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT HOW SKERRIES MAN DIED

*The shooting of Thomas Hand, at his brother's house at Baltrasna, has created widespread horror in Skerries and Balbriggan districts. The terrible occurrence adds yet another to the series of horrifying tragedies that have taken place in recent times in this locality. Mr. Hand for many years took an active interest in Gaelic and Labour movements, and was closely identified with the I.T.G.W.U. of which he was local Secretary. Up to a few months ago he lived with his wife and four children at Milverton, about a mile from Skerries, and followed his occupation as a quarry worker, but the fact that he became "wanted" obliged him to leave his family and keep continually "on the run". Occasionally he slept in his home in Milverton and at other times in the house where he was reared at Baltrasna, where his brother and two sisters reside. There he went on Saturday night, having been to confession at Skerries.*

#### A LONELY HOUSE

*The homestead is a small one-storey thatched building on headland known as "The Hills" in a peculiarly inaccessible situation. It is approached on one side by a long laneway off the road and on the other by a pathway through several fields. The cottage is not visible from the roadway. Only those acquainted with its locality could reach the place*

without difficulty. First hand stories of the scene on Sunday morning within the house were obtained by an "Irish Independent" representative from the deceased's brother and sister. Charles Hand, who had retired early, said before he went to sleep he heard Thomas came in. Rose and Bridget, his sisters, were the only other occupants of the house. About 1.30am, he was awakened by heavy pounding at the door. "I got up" he proceeded, and was putting on my clothes when the door was forced and a party of men rushed in. They were all in uniform except one who wore an overcoat and a cap. Some of them had something rubbed over their faces.

#### BROTHER QUESTIONED

"They said they wanted to bring me out. I was brought to the kitchen where they put me on a chair and began questioning me. They asked what I knew about my brother. I replied I knew nothing about his business, or what he was. At this time I was awakened by the hammering on the door, I looked over to where Tom slept, and saw he was gone". "In the garden behind the house I also saw a number of uniformed men. The house seemed to be surrounded. While I was sitting on the chair in the kitchen I heard two shots. The party then searched the house, including a small loft, and even the thatch. My two sisters ran to a neighbour's house and found Tom lying dead. There were several bullet wounds in the head and neck, and his face was covered with blood".

#### SISTER'S STORY

Miss Bridget Hand with much emotion told our representative she was awakened by the pounding at the door, and heard the men rushing in. "When I looked from my room across the house I saw Tom getting through the window, I heard him being halted outside, and then the last I saw of him...until we found him dead...was standing outside the house with his hands up". Several times in the last few weeks, both deceased's home and the house where he met his death, were watched. Yesterday a District Inspector accompanied by the police, visited the house and inspected the surroundings. Mr Charles Hand was instructed not to move the body pending a military inquiry. Many sympathisers called during the day.

When their evil work was done, the Tans set about searching the house and outbuildings for guns, ammunition, money or whatever they could find, but they found nothing and so they left as quickly as they had come. However, unknown to them there was money hidden. Thomas had given some money to his sister Bridget to mind for him on an earlier date and if anything should happen to him, she was to give the money to Rose. Bridget did not know where to hide the money but decided to hide it in the thatch of the roof where it remained undisturbed until given to Mrs Hand later.<sup>45</sup>

After the way was clear of the raiders, the lane was alive with people trying to come to terms with what had happened, Charles, Bridget and Rose went to do what they could for Thomas, but it was hopeless, they bandaged him up as best they could but he had been hit with too many bullets and must have died very quickly. One can only imagine the grief that struck Charles and the two girls who were still relatively young to have experienced such an event as the shooting dead of their brother in cold blood in the middle of the night. Bridget was twenty-four and Rose was twenty years of age. Someone would have to be despatched to Milverton to break the news of the death to Rose, a not very pleasant task and one can only wonder at how she would receive the news and tell the children that they no longer had a father. At that time the children Patrick, Elizabeth, Tomás and Mary Teresa were nine, eight, six and five years old respectively. Next morning Bridget was the one to travel to Milverton, to Farrell's house on Evers Lane near the railway bridge into Skerries. It was here that Rose and her four children sought refuge in the weeks or months leading up to the fateful night. She was there the next morning very early when Bridget Hand called to the door and when Rose answered the call, Bridget said to her, "Rose, they got him last night, he's dead".

What about informers and how did the Tans know that he was there? Was it luck that brought them there that night or did someone know that Thomas was going there and informed the military authorities? We shall never know, but it certainly does seem



very coincidental that the one night in weeks that Thomas goes to the house, the Black and Tans should arrive as well. Many people have their own theories about how the Tans knew to pick that night, but there is no way at this remove, from 1920 to ascertain hard facts. Patrick Hand said on 'Live at 3' on RTÉ television that his father left confession and was tailed home that night. Tomás Hand does not think that this is a plausible idea due to the difficulty of following someone in the pitch black of night through fields without being detected by the person being tracked. Maybe someone with local knowledge saw him start off in the direction of Baltrasna and guessed where he might go? Tomás says that his father left confession and went by the library, down Strand Street, turned left into Cross Street and up the Dublin Road, across the field known locally as the 'Bay of Belug' and that no one could have walked behind undetected.

On Monday the 6 December, a District Inspector, accompanied by the police, visited the house and inspected the surroundings. Charles Hand was instructed by them not to move the body, pending a military inquiry. This order was given under the '*Restoration of Order in Ireland Regulations*', courts of inquiry on dead bodies. These regulations were brought in during 1918-1919 to deal with the problem of how to cover up and mask the fact that people were being murdered by British forces in Ireland, without the benefit of a trial or hearing and a chance to prove their innocence. In keeping with the desire of the authorities to explain away the embarrassment of how these people met their deaths it was necessary that civilian doctors or coroners be forbidden to have any dealings with such bodies. Only the military authorities would investigate these bodies and the usual outcome of such inquiries was to shift the blame on to others or to find death to have been caused by a person or persons unknown. Thus it comes as no surprise to find that in the case of Thomas Hand, the outcome of the military inquiry was similar to the above.

McNally Undertakers,<sup>46</sup> Dublin Street, Balbriggan, handled the

funeral. The cost was six pounds in total. They removed the body of Thomas Hand from his brother's home in Baltrasna Lane on the 6 December and conveyed it to the church in Skerries, where it remained over night. James and Francis Murray, friends of the family had prepared the body for burial. On the 7 December, after funeral mass, the hearse moved off on the journey to Baldungan cemetery. We must assume the funeral was well attended by people from Skerries, Baltrasna and the Hills where he spent his childhood; a contingent from the members of the Fingal Brigade in the area would surely be there unless they were afraid of being picked up by the police. Any show of outward military honours by his former colleagues in the IRA during the march to the cemetery or during the interring of the body, such as the firing of volleys of gunfire over the grave, is unlikely, in my opinion due to the over powering presence of military forces active in the area at the time (Black and Tans). Before the funerals of Seán Gibbons and Seamus Lawless in Balbriggan in September, the people of the town were warned that there would be reprisals if there was any show of military honours by republican sources on the day. It might be possible that a similar threat hung over the funeral of Thomas Hand. However, floral wreaths could be sent and the rosary could have been recited in Irish over the grave.

The body of Thomas lies buried in Baldungan cemetery in a grave close to his mother, father, brothers and sisters. The inscription on his headstone is in Irish, but translated says 'In loving memory of Thomas Hand, Justice under the Irish Republic who was treacherously murdered on the 5 December 1920. May his soul be at God's right hand'.<sup>47</sup> Rose Hand is also buried there with her husband. She died on 6 June 1965, aged 90 years. On the day of the funeral some of the children were sent to stay with friends in the town and when inquiring of their father were told that he had gone away for a while. Some time after his father's death Patrick was sent to school in Dublin, to Saint Vincent's orphanage in Glasnevin for a year and a half. He was then sent to St Joseph's College in Clondalkin for a



while. Colleges of teaching in Irish were set up at the time and Patrick decided to try for teaching and was accepted. When he graduated he taught in Halston Street in Dublin beside the Criminal court.

The military inquiry was held on 8 December and was presided over by the following, G. F. N. Dunne, Major W.E. Ludford and L. T. G. Hartland.<sup>48</sup> Their conclusion was presented as the cause of death that appeared on death certificate i.e. 'Shock and haemorrhage following gun shot wounds, inflicted by person/persons unknown'. The death certificate is number 148 and was registered on the 5 January 1921.

Thomas Hand lived for only forty-two years, not a long life certainly, but none the less it was a life lived to the full. His early years were spent in a school barely worthy of the name from the point of view of the limited resources available to the teachers, only two rooms and very little in the way of basic facilities that are taken for granted today. Also the authorities did not allow the teaching of the Irish language, but Thomas left the Grange National School able to read and write and was able to learn Irish later, when he was involved with the Gaelic League, a quite remarkable achievement, considering his earlier disadvantages. He lived at home with his parents until he was thirty-two years old and worked on the land, maybe on Woods Estate. I am unable to confirm this as the years between his leaving school and his marriage to Rose Coleman in 1910 are not remembered by anyone living. Of his married life we can say he took to the role like a duck to water and fathered five lovely children, though sadly only four survived beyond childhood. Due to his activities in the volunteer movement his family were to pay a huge price. When the children were only in their first years of life, he was arrested and taken away from them at an age when they could not understand why he had gone with barely time to say goodbye. When he did return and again settled into family life, the peace was shattered when the Black and Tans arrived and he had to go on the run. What sort of childhood was that for those little ones, for they hardly remembered their father? In 1920 he was taken for



good after being shot by the Black and Tans and they would see him no more.

Paddy being the eldest was to bear a burden too big for a boy of nine years to be expected to bear. He was sent to an orphanage in Dublin in an effort to give him a better chance in life and it did. But it was tough on him; he ran away at least once and was found in the northern part of the country and returned to Dublin. Eventually he became a national schoolteacher. Rose Hand also got a raw deal, she married in 1910 and six years later she lost her husband for the first time and then briefly got him back; a few years later, he was murdered. But she was tough, she was a strong person and she needed to be because her children had to be fed and looked after, she was on her own save for the welcome help from neighbours that she was fortunate to have around her.

The evidence coming from the letters of Thomas to Rose (we have no letter written from her to him) points to a supporting wife, not one giving her husband a hard time or blaming him in any way for their predicament. If she had done so it surely would be reflected in his correspondence with her. On that basis it looks like she shared his views on Ireland and was fully behind him in his efforts to do something about it by making the British loosen their grip on the country. So maybe Thomas Hand was just unlucky to have been caught by his enemies and killed. Whether he was sold out by an informer or not makes no difference now. He paid the price and so did his children, each one of them in their own way and whether that price was worth paying is not for me to speculate. One thing is sure and that is, without men and women of courage and endurance in the face of incredible odds, with the will to make huge sacrifices for little personal gain, Ireland would still be under the Union Jack today.

#### THE WAY TO PEACE . . . Hester Piatt

*Go in peace, said the priest, closing the little grille of the confessional and he went, his soul at peace, for all he was a soldier in a land at war. In*

*peace, though he followed a star that led over perilous ways, away from wife and children, home and ease, by paths of danger, nights of watching, wanderings, with no place whereon to lay his head. He turned to go, not home, the dear fireside, lighting the dear loving faces was not for him. Home he dare not seek, for he was a hunted man. Nor would he return to that distant sheltering roof where he had lately stayed, for tomorrow he must be at early mass and the way between it and church was long, open and so perilous. He would seek shelter instead in the old home of his childhood, over the fields. In the house he might be safe. For this one night he thought, they would not think to find me there.*

#### TROUBLED TIMES

*As he passed through the wind swept streets of the little town, the cottagers were already gathered into their homes. It was better to be indoors in those times, though even indoors you were not safe. For had they not often been wakened from the wearied sleep of their hard working days by the frantic barking of their dogs which heralded the arrival of lorries from the distant camp. Then woman would tremble and children weep with fear of danger and death to wintry night, the wind blew keenly up from the sea, the roar of the rocky shelving shore.*

*He crossed the stile from the Dublin road and took his way across the barren fields, thinking thus to evade a possible spy, yet not fearing one. He had been so long on the run, that he had grown callous to danger.*

#### SWEET MEMORIES

*And so he went, perhaps a trifle carelessly across the kindly hills. Surely the old earth knew his familiar step. Was here not the tangle of brambles where he had gathered purple, luscious berries many an autumn in his boyhood. And this the field where he had run barefoot in the dewy summer dawn when the creamy mushrooms dotted the green stringing them on the slender stems of the blossoming grass. In this ditch grew the purple loosestrife and fragrant meadowsweet, and here the honeysuckle had blown its scented bugles from the hedge.*

*The way was all so sweet, so safe, so crowded with innocent memories.*

*Here rose at his footsteps, visions of himself as a round eyed child, a laughing sunburnt boy, a youth grown studious, taking his books behind a hedge secure from interruption while he mastered his country's language and history. He hardly remembered the time when first was born within his breast that passionate love for Ireland, that longing to serve her, which had since guided all his days. Perhaps it was always with him and grew and spread and blossomed with his growth. Its first fruits were to make him a Gaelic scholar and fluent speaker in a neighbourhood English speaking and unawakened to the Irish revival, its last to offer himself gladly to the service of his country when the call came.*

#### NO WARNING

*And now he is in the long breen, ink black between the tall hedges, he has opened the gate of the path which leads to the lonely house sentenced by its clustering trees. The alarm of the dog has changed to a welcoming whine, a thin beam of light shows from the opening door, and he is drawn inside. The door is closed and bolted, shutting out the night.*

#### THE WAY TO PEACE

*His mother, who is happy in such times, being dead, there are only his sisters and brother to greet him. To share the simple supper to kneel by the hearth side when the rosary signals the four for rest.*

*A whisper of warning and fear for the morrow as good night is said, and the weary man sleeps in peace beneath the old roof. While darkness and silence lap the house within and without.*

#### IN PEACE

*Ah, why did the old earth not warn her child as he crossed her winter slopes. Could no word or whisper from field or sea or sky tell him to run, to look, to listen for the foul shape that followed, hiding and pausing ever pausing, until the evil eyes that had dared to mark him at his prayers in the church beheld him drawn to his old home. The spys work is done, he has received the price of blood. There is a stealthy rustle breaking the stillness, a gleam of steel, a crowding of dark figures, the dog barks*



*furiously, the cattle low uneasily in their byres, the pony pulls at his halter, and trembles with a beasts instinct of fear of unknown evil. The chickens are noisy in their coop, a sea gull screams passing over the house towards the sea. Alas too late came the warnings. The house is already surrounded, great blows of rifle butts are shattering the worn door. What avails his sister's shrieks, his helpless brother's prayers, they are not men, these armed demons who throng the little house. For soon shots rip the terrified nights and beside the threshold of his childhood he lies in his blood, his head shattered, his eyes staring dreadfully as when they looked last upon the faces of his murderers. They wake him in silence, in whispered prayers, in tears, braving the terrors of those dreadful nights, to pay the last tribute to an honoured and beloved friend and neighbour. From far and near they came and when the funeral winds its way through the long boreen, past the little town, up the high slopes, it is on the shoulders of his comrades, his coffin is borne all the way to his grave, on the hill beneath the ruined castle, which looks grim and shattered from Cromwell's guns, upon the plains of Meath. And here he may sleep in peace at last, among the quiet dead and yet not so soundly but that he hears the trumpets and the shouting when the land he loved comes to her own.<sup>49</sup>*

#### LAST CONFESSION

*"Go in peace", the old priest said, "Your sins are all forgiven,  
And say a prayer for departed souls and one for sinners living,  
And don't forget a prayer for me, for I too also need one,  
For your penance, three Our Father's say – God bless you, go to  
Communion"*

*Twas quiet when he left the church and scarce a soul in sight,  
And he felt that something was amiss – "I'll go the long way home  
tonight"  
And someone is about to give the Judas Kiss tonight.*

*Across Ballug he made his way in the shadow of the mill,  
Through Gaffney's Gap, the way lay clear on up to Shallock Hill,*

*And then on to the railway line, this way for time to gain,  
And half a mile and he'd be home thro' the gap at Kelly's lane.*

*The night was deathly quiet – he walked quickly as he could,  
And way off in the distance a fox barked in Hatton's Wood,  
A hunting owl on velvet wings against the night sky plain,  
"Thank God", he said, "Not far to go and then Baltrasna Lane".*

*But the Judas Kiss was given as events made later plain,  
And it wasn't long before they came, in stealth along the Lane,  
The hunting owl was silent and the fox had gone to ground  
As the dedicated Black and Tans the cottage did surround.*

*He had no chance to hide or flee, the "Tans" made sure of that,  
Their ring of steel the cottage bound – not exit for a rat,  
"Surrender in the king's name now", an officer decreed,  
But the only King that he bowed to hung on his rosary beads.*

*The silence of that peaceful night was shattered in a wink,  
With report of Enfield rifles and sickening cordite stink,  
His bid for freedom halted as a hail of lead he met,  
From an angel got Communion at the moment of his death.*

*How did they know, those Black and Tans just where and when to go,  
Did someone silver pieces take and Judas Kiss bestow?  
To this day those two questions still unanswered stand,  
But never questioned was the bravery of patriot, Tom Hand.*

AR DHEIS DE GO RAIBH A ANAM.

SIONNAC (JOHN FOX)

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Joe Murray

Thomas Hand