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**WE SERVE NEITHER KING NOR KAISER
BUT IRELAND**

IRISH TRANSPORT & GENERAL WORKERS UNION



LIBERTY HALL

‘The Darkest Hour Is Before The Dawn: The Story of Arthur ‘Neal’ Wicks (1893-1916), English Socialist, Hotel Waiter & Soldier of the Irish Citizen Army

Mystery surrounds the death of a young Englishman killed in action during the Easter Rising. We know that he was shot and fatally wounded during the last hours of the fighting on Friday, 21 April. However, this man was not a British Army soldier but a socialist and trade unionist who fought and died with the Irish Citizen Army (ICA). As far as can be ascertained, he was the only insurgent to be killed who was neither born in Ireland nor had any known Irish ancestry. As he had not lived in Dublin for long and was not known to many of the Volunteers, there is some confusion over his identity with conflicting reports and opinions.

Three respected Irish Volunteers – Thomas Craven (1889-1955), Joe Good (1895-1962) and Charles Saurin (1894-1964) – separately wrote about an English socialist volunteer who fought bravely alongside them during Easter Week. Saurin believed his name was ‘Neale’ and wrote that he did not receive ‘recognition in the casualties lists which were published later’.¹ Good called him ‘Comrade’ and said of him: ‘we do not know where he is buried, and I have never found out his name ... he was our gallant ‘Unknown Warrior’’.² Craven thought his name was ‘Allen’ and observed that he ‘does not figure in any of the published lists of ‘The Men Who Died For Ireland’’.³ Both men gave very similar physical description of Wicks. Saurin called him ‘an alert, handsome dark, foreign-looking young fellow’⁴ and a ‘Jewish-looking youth’.⁵ Craven remembered him as a stranger with ‘Jewish features, dark hair and very bright, dark eyes’.⁶ Oddly, in 1924, Jim Larkin’s *Irish Worker* ICA Roll of Honour listed ‘A. Weeks ... a Jewish comrade who joined on Easter Monday and died in action’, something no other primary source claims.⁷



Metropole Hotel
(image courtesy of ILHS Archives)

After analysing the key first-hand accounts and the supporting records, all three descriptions in all probability refer to the one person – a young revolutionary born Arthur Wicks who used the alias John Neal. Born Arthur Herbert Wicks on 11 May, 1893 in Norwich, his father William was an orthopedic shoemaker while his mother Ellen was a homemaker. The fourth oldest of seven children, seventeen-year old Arthur was listed on the 1911 Census as a hotel waiter.⁸ This was his occupation in both London and Dublin until he left his job quite abruptly at the Shelbourne Hotel a few days before the Rising. Wicks moved to London in his late teens. He joined the Amalgamated Union of Hotel, Club & Restaurant Workers and played a ‘prominent role’ in the major hotel strike which took place in April 1913.⁹

Joseph Good, a London-based Irish Volunteer who would later fight with Wicks during Easter Week, remembers seeing him in 1913 ‘speaking eloquently’ in favour of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) at Hyde Park Corner.¹⁰ Good dryly noted that he ‘looked hungry and sounded hoarse’. Wicks’ relationship with the Wobblies continued as he was spotted wearing an IWW button on his coat during the Rising.¹¹ After the strike had ended, Wicks faced being blacklisted by employers because of his trade union activity. With little prospect of getting another job in the hotel trade in England and with the looming prospect of Conscription, Wicks moved to Dublin where he used the alias John Neal.

In early March 1916, a notice was put into the ‘Males Disengaged’ section of the *Irish Times* reading: ‘Young man, aged 23, seeks situation in any department Hotel, Club or Restaurant : all around experience; distance no object - John Neal, 54 South Richmond St’.¹² Number 54 Richmond Street was a boarding house run by Josephine Neilan. At the time, her sister Kate O’Dea lived in the



Postcard depicting Hotel Metropole after Easter Week
(image courtesy of ILHS Archives)

Fairview.²⁰ This group also engaged in long range sniping against the British for the thirty-six hours they were based in the area.²¹ Saurin recalled that Wicks had no uniform but did possess a ‘modern German service rifle that he kept in very good condition’.²²

Throughout Tuesday afternoon, British troops came under fire from the ICA at Annesley Bridge as they moved along the railway. That evening it became clear that all positions in the area were being encircled by the British Army and so a dispatch was made from James Connolly in the GPO to Captain Frank Henderson with the order for a complete evacuation of Fairview.²³ Craven and his company of ICA men, including Wicks, joined with Henderson’s F Company and together they marched into the city centre.²⁴ Arriving at around 8pm, the sixty-five men were lined up and addressed by Patrick Pearse who gave a ‘most stirring piece of oratory’.²⁵ The men from Fairview were then handed over to Connolly and divided up to take different positions in the vicinity. Under the command of Oscar Traynor, about twenty-two men including Wicks were sent to the Hotel Metropole.²⁶

Immediately after entering the hotel, Wicks (who Saurin notes gave his name as ‘Neale’) suggested that they take the master key from the manager.²⁷ He and Saurin then made a tour of the storerooms. Saurin observed that Wicks/Neal knew his way about as he had been a ‘pageboy [sic] in a hotel’.²⁸ As he had ruined his shoes and cycling stockings during the fighting earlier in Fairview, Wicks swapped them for a ‘good pair of boots ... and a pair of girl’s stockings’, which he found in one of the bedrooms. Saurin notes, that with the girls stockings pulled up to his knees, he looked a ‘rather curious figure’.²⁹

On Thursday afternoon the British big guns began to shell Sackville Street forcing Traynor to move all his men in the Metropole down two storeys. He left Wicks on his own on the top floor to watch for signs of fire. Saurin describes how he used to ‘sit right out on the parapet’ which ran past the windows on the top floor and scanning the whole street with a pair of field glasses, apparently quite oblivious of the fact that ‘any moment might be his last’.³⁰ Not long after, Wicks and a couple of the Fianna boys put on chef’s jacks, went down to the kitchen and cooked for the men stationed in the Metropole. So impressed was he by Wicks that Saurin admitted that ‘he was one of the calmest and bravest individuals I have ever encountered’.³¹ Both Good and Saurin’s descriptions are very specific recalling a self-described socialist, who called everyone ‘Comrade’ and acted as a look-out in the Metropole.

On Friday morning, the exhausted Volunteers in the Metropole were finally ordered to withdraw from their position. The men dashed across Princes’ Street and into the GPO, only to find the building largely empty. In their haste to leave, the leaders had forgotten the Metropole contingent until at the last moment Seán McDermott had remembered to order their recall.³² As Oscar Traynor was marshalling his men into two files, Thomas Leahy was chatting to a small group of Volunteers at the exit and Hugh Hehir was waiting to help move the wounded Connolly. Without warning the ammunition pouch of volunteer Andy Furlong’s exploded spraying shrapnel everywhere.



'Cool customer' from Charles Saurin, 'Hotel Metropole Garrison' (Pt.II) An tOglach, March 20 1926, p. 2.

Traynor remembers this ‘explosion and what appeared to be a number of shots’³³ while Leahy recalls a burst of fire that injured a ‘young Englishman ... and a supporter of the Citizen Army’.³⁴

Bullets flew in every direction - nine pierced Andy Furlong’s leg, one went through Charles Saurin’s right palm and several ripped into Wicks’ lower body. Saurin felt there was as much evidence to suggest that another Volunteer may have accidentally fired one of his ‘infernal American shotguns’ or that it was a stray bullet from a British rifle that ‘came fleeting through the flames from across the road’.³⁵ Wicks swayed against Saurin’s left shoulder and calmly asked, ‘Can’t you stand away and let a fellow lie down?’ As Saurin and several others stretched him out on a pile of mail sacks, Oscar Traynor bent over him and asked was he badly hurt to which he replied:

‘I’m dying, Comrade’ he answered and upon his handsome face a look settled that I can only describe as dignified in the extreme. All the lower part of his body was absolutely riddled and though his wounds were attended to at once it was obvious that it was only a matter of time till his end.’³⁶

Wicks in fact survived for another twenty-four hours. He was attended to first by Irish Volunteer and Red Cross man Harry Ridgeway.³⁷ Volunteer Christopher Tallon wrote that ‘one of the men of the Metropole Garrison ... a fellow named Neill ... was badly wounded’ at the evacuation of the GPO. Tallon, Ridgeway and two others carried the injured Wicks and Connolly to Moore Street.³⁸

Joseph Good, who was helping the wounded in number sixteen, came across Wicks, as he was lying wounded on the top floor of the house.³⁹ Good and a Red Cross man (probably Ridgeway) did their best to help make him feel comfortable by lying him on a mattress from the house next door, compressing his stomach wounds and pre-tending to pile more blankets over him after repeated complaints that he felt cold. One of the most moving features of Good’s account is that Wicks, even in his agonized state, asked him repeatedly ‘How are things going, Comrade?’ Finally to perhaps both console Good and no doubt himself, he declared that ‘The darkest hour is before the dawn’.⁴⁰

Good is of the opinion that a ‘kindhearted’ British soldier loosened Wicks’ bindings’ that were restricting the flow of blood and he was taken by stretcher to Dublin Castle.⁴¹ He died on Saturday night 29 April, 1916 as he was being moved to the hospital in the Castle.⁴² Wicks’s body was first interred in the garden at the rear of the Castle. It was exhumed on Saturday, 20 May as reported in the *Irish Independent*: ‘On Sat. 8 bodies were disinterred at Dublin Castle and one at Trinity College. Of these, 5 are believed to be named Keogh, Neal, Byrne, Geoghegan and Byrne. The remainder have not been identified’.⁴³ The four other named individuals who were disinterred along with Neal (Wicks) were all insurgents – Gerald Keogh and James Byrne (Irish Volunteers), and Louis Byrne and George Geoghegan (ICA). The Glasnevin Cemetery records state that ‘John Neal’ was reburied on 20 May in what is now the 1916 Plot at St. Paul’s Section in grave number DA 37 ½.⁴⁴ Keogh and James Byrne were buried in DA 38 while Louis Byrne and Geoghegan were buried in DA 37 ½ alongside Wicks/Neal, demonstrating that his comrades were fully aware of his affiliation with the ICA.

Historian Ray Bateson found a letter from about 1928 in the *National Graves Association* (NGA) Archives from ICA veteran Christopher Crothers to the Secretary of the Graves Committee which states as follows:

‘I have gone into the records of the ICA as given to me by Captain (Robert) de Coeur as a gift ... The names of the ICA men buried in the Plot are as follows:

Pt C Darcy ICA	Pt Jas Fox
Pt G Geoghegan ICA	Pt Fred Ryan
Pt Louis Byrne	Pt Arthur Weekes (sic)
Pt Phil Clarke	Pt Jas McCormack
Pt Jack Adams	Pt John Dwan

All of the above were ICA men.’⁴⁵

The important ‘Records of the Republican Soldiers’ Casualty Committee’ completed in 1928, lists ‘Arthur ‘Neill’ Weekes’ from Norwich as a ‘thoroughly good soldier’.⁴⁶

It corroborates that he worked in the Shelbourne Hotel and was ‘killed in Moore Lane at the evacuation of the GPO on 29th April 1916’. These forms were signed by Oscar Traynor.

Arthur Wicks, a young, idealistic English revolutionary socialist working as a waiter in Dublin on the eve of a dramatic rebellion, joined the insurgents and took up arms against his own country’s troops. From serving British Army soldiers in the Shelbourne to shooting at them within a matter of days, Wicks’ fascinating story adds an important dimension to an often nationalist narrative.

Sam McGrath

Notes

This article would not have been made possible without information and advice from Ray Bateson and John Corr.

- 1 Charles Saurin, ‘Hotel Metropole Garrison (Pt. II)’, *An tOlgach*, 20 March, 1926, pp. 4 -5.
- 2 Joe Good, *Enchanted by Dreams: The Journal of a Revolutionary*, (Brandon, Dingle, 1996), pp. 41-42.
- 3 National Library of Ireland (NLI) P8192, Joseph McGarrity Papers, Thomas Craven, Easter 1916 Rising account, p. 1.
- 4 Charles Saurin, ‘Hotel Metropole Garrison (Pt. I)’, *An tOlgach*, 13 March, 1926, p. 4.
- 5 Saurin, ‘Hotel Metropole Garrison’ (Pt. II), p. 4.
- 6 NLI, P8192, Joseph McGarrity Papers, Thomas Craven, Easter 1916 Rising account, p. 11.
- 7 *Irish Worker*, 3 May, 1924. There is no mention of any such link in his entry in the Records of the Republican Soldiers’ Casualty Committee (1928) or in Wicks’ short biography in the *Irish Workers Voice*, 1930. Wicks is not a Jewish name and his family were in all likelihood Church of England.
- 8 1911 Census of England, Norfolk, Norwich, 144 Old Palace Road.
- 9 *Irish Workers’ Voice*, 19 April, 1930.
- 10 Bureau of Military History, Witness Statement (BMH WS) 388, Joseph Good,.
- 11 NLI, P8192, Joseph McGarrity Papers, Thomas Craven, Easter 1916 Rising account, p. 11.
- 12 *Irish Times*, 3 March, 1916
- 13 A member of G Company of the Third Battalion, IRA, he was arrested in September 1922 in possession of a ‘Webley officer, fully loaded and a Mills live bomb’ after Free State soldiers were fired upon as they were travelling along Stephen’s Green. O’Dea gave 54 South Richmond Street as his address in 1922. In 1956, O’Dea married actress Siobhán McKenna and the couple lived in the house until 1970.
- 14 *Irish Workers’ Voice*, 19 April 1930.
- 15 Shelbourne Hotel Archive, 1916 Wage Books. Special thanks to Michael O’Sullivan, co-author with Bernadette O’Neill, of *The Shelbourne and Its People*, (Blackwater Press, Dublin, 1999) who arranged access to the archive.
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 Craven, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- 18 BMH WS 1,686, Ruaidhrí Henderson.
- 19 *ibid.*
- 20 David Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland’s Irish Revolution, 1887-1922*, (Cork University Press, 2003), p. 40.
- 21 BMH WS 288, Charles Saurin.
- 22 Saurin, ‘Hotel Metropole Garrison (Pt. II)’, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- 23 Saurin, WS 288, *op. cit.*
- 24 BMH WS 1,687, Harry Colley.
- 25 Clair Willis, *Dublin 1916: The Siege of the GPO*, (Profile Books, London, 2009), p. 52.
- 26 Saurin, ‘Hotel Metropole Garrison (Pt. I)’, p. 3.
- 27 *ibid.*, p. 4.
- 28 *ibid.*
- 29 *ibid.*
- 30 *ibid.*
- 31 *ibid.*
- 32 Fitzpatrick, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
- 33 BMH WS 340, Oscar Traynor.
- 34 BMH WS 660, Thomas Leahy.
- 35 Saurin, ‘Hotel Metropole Garrison (Pt. II)’, p. 6.
- 36 *ibid.*

