

Bl Dominic Collins SJ

30 October marks the feast day of one of two Irish Jesuit Blessed. In an adapted extract from her book, *The 17 Irish Martyrs* (Veritas, 2022), former Irish president Mary McAleese recounts the life of Bl Dominic Collins SJ.

Dominic Collins was thirty-six years old when he was hanged in Youghal, County Cork, the town of his birth. This was his first visit in fifteen years since he had set out on a life of adventure as a headstrong twenty-year-old. It was the tragic finale of a colourfully chaotic career.

Youghal was a bustling port and an administrative centre for the Crown when Dominic was a lad. His family were evidently important citizens, for both his father and brother became mayors of the town. The practice of the Catholic faith in the area went up and down depending on whether soldiers were garrisoned in Youghal. When the soldiers were in town, the priests quietly departed. When the soldiers moved on, the priests moved back in.

It is not known if young Dominic attended the school which the Jesuit Robert Rochford opened in Youghal, but given his fascination with the Jesuits when he grew to adulthood, it is possible that he did. The school did not operate for very long. The upheaval wrought in Youghal by Gerald, Earl of Desmond in November 1579, set off a chain of events which forced the Jesuit school to close and ended Robert Rochford's career as a teacher.

In these troubled times there was

scarce chance of schools operating normally, so Dominic received little formal education. Determinedly Catholic, he had dreamed of becoming a soldier, but he would have to join the Queen's forces supporting the Crown, or become a rebel, fighting outside the law for political and religious freedom. For different reasons, neither option attracted him. Instead he sailed for France, a tough, ambitious, hotheaded twenty-year-old, hungry for adventure. He found many opportunities for his military ambitions and spent much of the next decade honing his soldier's skills with more than a little success. Yet when he made the return journey to Youghal, it was not in the uniform of a soldier but in the habit of a Jesuit brother. He came home not as an avenging soldier but as a man transformed by the crucible of the battlefield into a gentle, prayerful, radiant missionary. His homecoming was to be bloody nonetheless.

Fate brought him to Corunna, a naval base in northern Spain where many Irish soldiers were stationed. It was an ideal place to pick up news from home, for it was a popular landing place for travellers from Ireland.

It was the season of Lent in the spring of 1598. The Irish fleet had arrived at Corunna and Father White



was in town to hear their confessions. He was an interesting man, passionately devoted to the welfare of the Irish in Spain. He had founded the Irish college in Salamanca when it became impossible for Catholics to get an education in Ireland. He and Dominic struck up a warm and immediate friendship.

As soon as Dominic heard that White was a Jesuit, he felt the jagged fragments inside himself suddenly slip comfortably into place. Now he knew with certainty that he had to be a Jesuit. He was overcome with an enthusiasm not shared by Father White. The Jesuits were formidably intellectual and highly educated. Dominic's lack of early education ruled out the Jesuit priesthood. It didn't matter, said Dominic, he would settle for the Jesuit brotherhood.

He packed his bags to leave Co-

runna where the story of his vocation had become the local soap opera. His soldier friends were stunned. Dominic had seemed to be the archetypal successful career soldier. He was at the top of his profession, he had a comfortable pension, people jumped to attention at his commands and here he was going off to wash floors for the love of God. They were incredulous. So were the Jesuits when Dominic arrived wearing his captain's uniform on 8 December 1598.

Suddenly Dominic's life was up-ended yet again when his Spanish superiors notified him in the summer after his profession that he had been appointed to a post back home in Ireland, companion to Father James Archer, the Jesuit chaplain to the Spanish forces, a man high on the English wanted list.

It seems that each time the Span-

