

# Firing squads bring Civil War to a close

## Week III

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Under guard: The staff at Galway's Custom House guarded by Free State troops 1922.

The Civil War in Galway came to an end because there was little appetite for further bloodshed in the face of ruthless determination by the Free State, or the pro-treatyites, to stamp out the anti-treaty forces. The Free State government warned that anyone carrying weapons other than the National Army, would be shot. Eleven Galway anti-treatyites were shot by firing squad. On January 20 1923 Martin Bourke, Stephen Joyce, Herbert Collins, Michael Walsh, and Thomas Hughes, all attached to the North Galway IRA Brigade, were arrested and executed in Athlone. On February 19 eighteen volunteers were arrested in Annaghdown, and brought to Galway gaol. It was given out that all were 'well armed'. Even though it was expected that all, or a number of them, would be shot, nothing happened.

In March a meeting of the commanding officers of the local anti-Treaty Forces was held in Roscommon. They were told to each select one target for attack. There wasn't much enthusiasm to prolong the war. The leader of the 2nd Western Brigade of the IRA, Comdt Thomas Maguire, commented that that during the War of Independence "The British were the enemy, the old enemy; there was a certain pride in having the ability to attack them. That feeling was totally absent in the Civil War."



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However, following the Roscommon meeting there was one attack on Headford barracks. Four men were killed, including John Higgins, and, later from his wounds, Daniel McCormack. But in the Headford attack, two Free State soldiers were also killed. Serious consequences to this followed on April 24. In Tuam Francis Cunnane (Headford ), Michael Monaghan (Headford ), Martin Moylan (Annaghdown ), John Maguire (Galway ), James or John Newell (Galway ), and James O'Malley (Oughterard ) were arrested and executed. All these men were part of Tom Maguire's Division. There were no other attacks.

Headford barracks and the Tuam executions were the final action in Galway. The war came to an end on May 23, with the anti-Treaty side badly beaten. "It had proved to be a pointless conflict," writes Tomás Kenny, " accomplishing little, but changing much, and embittering many."\*

### Enormous cost

Seventy-seven men were summarily executed by Free State forces during the conflict. It could be said that Galway got off lightly compared to other counties, notably Kerry. The precise figures for the dead and wounded are vague. But a maximum number of people killed during the Civil War is given as 4,000. Thousands were imprisoned. There were hunger strikes and protests, and the enormous cost of the war weakened the fledging Irish state.

It cost the lives of many public figures including Michael Collins, chief-of-staff of the Free State Army, Cathal Brugha, a hero of the Independence War and anti-treatyite, and Liam Lynch, commander of the anti Treaty forces. It has been suggested that the death of Lynch allowed the more pragmatic Frank Aiken, who took over as IRA Chief-of-Staff, to call a halt to what seemed a futile struggle.

A total of 192 'stately homes' of the old landed class were destroyed by the anti-Treaty forces as they roamed the countryside. Among them was Renvyle House, Connemara, belonging to Oliver St John Gogarty. Many anti Treaty forces believed that the ' Big House' class sided with the British during the War of Independence. The 1903 Wyndham Act, which allowed tenants to buy land from their landlords, had not been sufficiently worked through in Galway and Mayo. The absence of the local RIC, or any effective police force, allowed estates in the west to be burned, and its land occupied by local farmers. The new police force, the Garda Síochána (meaning Guard of the Peace of Ireland ) took over from the RIC in February 1922. It was not involved in the war, and was well placed to develop into an unarmed and politically neutral police service in the aftermath of a socially bitter struggle, which left long memories.

### Remembering Mellows

The leader of the Galway Rising, Liam Mellows, was arrested with other self-termed 'Republicans', including Rory O'Connor, Joe McKelvey, and Richard Barrett, when the Four Courts garrison surrendered on June 22 1922. They were imprisoned in Mountjoy gaol. Mellows was a strident voice expressing disappointment with the terms of the Treaty, and the Free State Government: " There would be no question of civil war here now were it not for the undermining of the Republic. The Republic has been deserted by those who state they still intend to work for a Republic. The Volunteers can have very little faith at this moment in the Government that assembles here, because all they see in it is a chameleon Government. One moment it is green, white and orange of the republic, and at the other moment it is the red, white and blue of the British Empire."

On December 8 1922 Mellows, O'Connor, McKelvey and Barrett were executed by firing squad in reprisal for the shooting of TD Seán Hales.



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Mellows is commemorated by statues in Oranmore, and at Eyre Square. The Irish Army barracks at Renmore is called Dún Uí Maoilíosa. He is also commemorated in the names of two hurling clubs, one in Galway and one in Wexford (although born in Manchester, Mellows spent most of his youth in Wexford. He is buried in Castletown cemetery, a few miles from Arklow ).

In 1952 a plan emerged to erect a memorial arch, to be carved by Seamus Murphy RHA, leading to the canal walk at O'Brien's Bridge. It was to bear the inscription: ' In honour of the men and women of Galway City and County who suffered for freedom during the years 1916 - 23.' A substantial sum of money was raised by public subscription. However, the inclusion of the Civil War dates led to the project being shelved.

NOTES: I am leaning on a new history of Galway during those turbulent years 1910 - 1923: Galway Politics and Society, by Tomás Kenny published by Four Courts Press, on sale € 9.95.

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