

The Civil War in Galway

Part 3 of Nollaig Ó Gadhra's series to mark the 75th anniversary

HAVING outlined the basic line-up of the various I.R.A. Commands at the start of the Civil War, quoted by the late J.J. Waldron in 1972 from Eoin Neeson's book, we continue this week with what Mr. Waldron had to say about the Neeson book itself and other matters that have some Galway connection, by way of backdrop to the outbreak of hostilities.

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Writing under the general heading 'The Civil War' Mr. Waldron said: "The first book published on The Civil War in Ireland was issued in 1966. The author was Eoin Neeson. This is not a detailed history; it gives the particular phases of the Pro and Anti-Treaty movements to the climax of the cease-fire when the order was given by Frank Aiken on May 4th, 1923. A Safety Act was passed by the Dáil in June 1923 and we know from present day experiences what that implied. A general election was mooted for August 27th and in the election the Pro-Treaty party had a majority. Neeson asks how men who had just spent four years as comrades in arms, fighting side by side against the British came to turn the guns on one another? It is quite evident that both sides made tragic blunders.

"Neeson thinks that perhaps one important point that may have had a bearing on the delegation that met Lloyd George to discuss the Treaty was that they were already divided in opinion to such an extent that they travelled in two groups by different routes when going to London.

"A member of the Provisional Government of the period named Blythe, who is still with us (1972), has made the following statement re the civil war: 'All countries must have civil war social or political in their evolution, and the sooner the better.' In my notes I only give what the public were told of the day to day actions between the Free State troops and the Republicans and probably the former's point of view.

"So to get the opposite point of view, an attempt should be made before it is too late to collect all information from the members still alive of those who took part in the war of 1922/1923.

"The beginning of the Civil war came about with the kidnapping of General J.J. O'Connell, chief of staff of the National Army, on June 26th, 1923. He was held prisoner in the Four Courts where the Republicans had their headquarters.

"At midnight on June 27th an ultimatum was delivered to the Four Courts demanding an end to the occupation. When the time limit had elapsed the National Army proceeded to bombard the building. The operation was carried out by the officers and men of Longford Brigade.

"The decision to bombard the Four Courts was not taken on orders from Churchill as is often said. The Government decided to take action after careful consideration over a period, i.e., a favourable election result and the detention of General O'Connell, brought the issue to a head.

"There follows part of an interview given by Rory O'Connor to Mrs. Clare Sheridan previous to the bombardment. Mrs. Sheridan was well-known in Galway in later years. She lived at the Spanish Arch and carried on her crafts there of artist and sculptor. [This is described as part of] a reported interview given by Rory O'Connor to Mrs. Clare Sheridan in the Four Courts Dublin before it was attacked by Free State Troops in June 1922. The interview was written for and published in the *The New York Times*.

"Mrs C.S. to R.O.C.:

I asked him if he believed he could make a successful Republic if he had it in his hands?

'Yes,' he replied. 'I don't see why a Republic shouldn't be easily a success: I don't dream of an Ireland smoking with chimney stacks, I don't think factories bring good conditions of happiness, but we could be a very prosperous rural people and could afford to buy what ships we need for our export.'

At that moment the telephone bell rang and from what I could make of the one-sided conversation he must have been answering a press representative.

He said 'No it is not customary to answer speeches of any British Ministers, they may say what they like, it makes no difference, what is that? They are going to blow us out of here? Just say that when they come we are ready for them,' and he rang off. I said 'Surely you will not stay here? They will blow the wall and roof down on your head, you haven't an earthly chance.' He shrugged his shoulders, 'then I will go down in the ruins or flames,' he replied.

When he said goodbye we looked at one another intently but did not speak our thoughts, I felt I was shaking hands with a man about to die. Alone, I made my way

back across the courtyard to the gate.

A ragged crowd as seen in a French Revolutionary film gazing through the bars. They made way for me to pass out and I watched me wonderingly as I walked through the Quays by the Liffey. To one looking back at this beautiful building with its central copper dome and its defaced sand-bagged windows, they seemed a heroic little band of rebels in the midst of a world of opposition.

In a few days the sequel was revealed. The Republicans were attacked but did not suffer any casualties, the civil authorities were the chief victims of the fight, as most of the records in the building were burned. Rory O'Connor did not go down in the ruins or flames and when finally an explosion filled the sky with fragmentary documents Winston Churchill philosophically told the British people that 'a state without Archives is better than Archives without a state'."

(The writer was a cousin of Churchill and whenever her name appeared in a paper it was always tagged with his name, as if that mattered a thrawneen to us Irish)."

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In the next articles we hope to sketch the atmosphere in Tuam in the Summer of 1922 as the clouds of Civil War began to spread out from Dublin after the capture of the Four Courts by the pro-Treaty forces of the Provisional Government. They now set out to "capture the country" during the crucial months of July and August, when no Dáil of any sort, Republican or Provisional, 32-county or 26-county, was in session and the so-called "Provisional Parliament" to which the Provisional Government, established according to the British interpretation of the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, would be responsible, was prorogued no less than five times. By the time this 26-county chamber was finally brought together in Leinster House on September 9th, 1922 the main moulds of the new emerging state were already emerging, even if that was probably not clear at the time.

Down the country however, the real "dual-power" conflict arose as the British forces withdrew from the 26 counties, and the old armed police force, the R.I.C., or what was left of it, was disbanded. This process, in turn, meant there was immediate competition between locally Republican and pro-Free state troops to take over the barracks that were being evacuated. Tuam and Galway were no exception in this regard as we shall see.