

The Civil War in Galway

Part 7 of Nollaig O Gadhra's series to mark the 75th anniversary

BY Christmas 1922, the Free State Government had executed some 19 Republican prisoners under the Emergency Powers which gave decisions about life and death to the Military Council. Up to then all executions had taken place in Dublin but immediately after Christmas, as the Free State army tightened its grip in areas outside the capital, the toll began to mount in the provinces.

Thus, on December 29th, 1922, two men, John Phelan and John Murphy, were shot in Kilkenny. The New Year executions began with five in Dublin on January 8th — Leo Dowling, Sylvester Heaney, Laurence Sheehy, Anthony O'Reilly and Terence Brady. There followed three others in Dundalk on January 13th — Thomas McKeown, John McNulty and Thomas Murray; four in Roscrea on January 15th — Francis Burke, Patrick Russell, Patrick MacNamara and Martin O'Shea while James Lillis was sent to meet his maker in Carlow on the same date.

Already it had become clear that the toll of horror was spreading out throughout the provinces, into almost every county and divisional area where the Free State army had triumphed. We shall return again at a later stage to this (unconscious?) policy of involving all commands and levels of the army in the shootings, because it is felt that this might have been meant to ensure that there would be no blaming G.H.Q. after the events. Every section of the army was being involved in blood and in bloody reprisals, not only in order to "share the responsibility" but also to strike terror into each local area. A policy had been initiated of sentencing men to death, in a very arbitrary fashion, and then holding them without any date of execution, effectively as state hostages, in the hope that this would deter attacks on the new State forces as they moved into as yet unconquered areas. We shall see this again also in relation to the Tuam-Galway area.

As it happened, the second half of January 1923 was more horrible than the first, as the policy of "official executions" gained momentum, and the Free State army came under pressure to "finish the war" before the longer summer days began but also before the tide of public opinion against what was being done in the name of a Military Council began to swell up.

The new phase began with four executions in Tralee — James Daly, John Clifford, Michael Brosnan and James Hanlon — and two in Limerick — Cornelius McMahon and Paddy Hennessy on January 20th, 1923. Readers who saw the recent "Ballyseedy" film on RTE may recall how General Mulcahy approved the execution of the four men in Tralee, the night before, by simply signing his signature on the back of a brown envelope, which Pat Butler found in his papers. This was in response to a case for some "deterrent" being necessary in Kerry, according to the local Commander Pat O'Daly, who telegraphed Mulcahy for approval that day.

There were five other executions on that January 20th, 1923 in Athlone, where the Western Command of the army was being entangled in the web. But they are of particular interest to us because all five had Galway or western connections, as indeed had the sixth person, General Tom Maguire, T.D. who was also sentenced to death. This was not carried out in Maguire's case, we suspect, because of his status as a T.D. — something which we have already mentioned in this series. The five to die in Athlone were Thomas Hughes, Michael Walsh, Herbert Collins, Stephen Joyce and Martin Burke. Leaba i measc na Naomh go raibh acu ar fad. Two days later James Melia, Thomas Lennon and Joseph

Ferguson were shot in Dundalk, while on January 25th Michael Fitzgerald and Patrick O'Reilly were executed in Waterford. On January 26th, Patrick Cunningham, William Conroy and Colm Kelly were shot in Birr, while on January 27th, Patrick Geraghty and Joseph Byrne went to their eternal reward in Port Laoise at the hands of former comrades.

J.J. Waldron's notes for 1923, from the Tuam area, need to be read in the context of this background. His entry for January 27th, 1923 about the executions the previous week, is obviously mistaken when he suggests the four Headford men were executed in Limerick rather than Athlone. It is indicative of the emotion generated even at the time of writing, compounded no doubt, by the innocent, sad, almost pathetic letters written by some of the men to their relatives, and copies of which are also included in the collection.

But Mr. Waldron begins his 1923 diary with an entry dated

January 13th, 1923

On Thursday night last Castle Hackett House was burned down. It was one of the finest mansions around Tuam. It contained many historic articles owned by the Kirwan family, now gone up in smoke and irreplaceable.

They had a very fine library with volumes going back 200 years. Perhaps the most precious loss felt by the family was the head of their famous racehorse "The Friar" who saved the family estates on whom they were bet by winning this race.

It is estimated that the total loss will be in the region of £60,000, a remarkably high figure for the period. That happened on Thursday night last at ten o'clock when armed men surrounded the house and called on the caretaker to open the door.

His wife who answered the call was told to clear out and take refuge in the Steward's house.

They were allowed time to remove their clothes and furniture. The reason they gave for the burning was that they expected the Free State army was going to occupy it.

They also said that they had no ill feelings against Col. Bernard, the present owner as he was a good man to the people in the locality.

January 16th, 1923

Free State Troops searched the villages of Cloonfush, Barnaderg, Cloonthue, Lisavally, and cleaned the roads of obstruction. In Barnaderg in one house they seized a pile of drapery goods including blankets, books, knitting thread, men's suit lengths, and 8.5 doz. of handkerchiefs, etc. but nobody was arrested.

During the week things were very intense during the hours of darkness in the town of Tuam. The army had set up many fortified positions throughout the town against the Republicans. Many of the positions were attacked but the military were unable to locate the attackers.

After all the disturbances during the night the only casualty was a bullet hole through Naughton's Drapery Shop on Shop Street.

Some time later a column of Free State Troops were refreshing themselves in Mrs. O'Donnell's premises in Milltown after a long march when suddenly a crowd of men arrived with revolvers cocked, entered unobserved and held up the soldiers and disarmed them. They gathered both their small and large arms including a Lewis gun.

January 27th, 1923

Executions

Eleven men were executed on Saturday last — five in Athlone — four in Tralee and two in Limerick and three on Monday in

Dundalk.

They were found guilty of being in possession of arms and were implicated in attacks on the railway and other offences.

In Limerick (this should read Athlone — Ed.) four of the men executed were from the Headford district and named as follows: Michael Walsh, Derrymore, Caherlistrane; Hubert Collins, Kickeen, Headford; Stephen Joyce, Derrymore, Caherlistrane and Martin Burke, Caherlistrane.

The Letters

Overleaf is a replica of the pathetic letters of two of the men executed in Costume Barracks Athlone on Saturday, January 21st, 1923.

Martin J. Burke, Caherlistrane has written two letters and Stephen Joyce, Derrymore, Caherlistrane had written one letter.

There were two other companions executed with them.

There were two men also executed in Tuam Military Barracks on May 30th, 1923. They also left a letter to be published of which I have a copy. I have a hazy recollection of the execution and I think those men were not natives in the Tuam area.

Costume Barracks,

Athlone,

Friday Night, January 20th, 1923

To dear Jim

Just a few lines before I pass away from this world forever. I suppose my time has come, so don't cry for my sake, life is sweet but we are getting a good chance of preparing for tomorrow.

Poor Tom Hughes is by my side, a soldier to the last. Stephen Joyce, Mick Walshe and Collins are going before God in the morning. I think with God's help I'm prepared to die, I don't know where this will find you but I will direct it to ???, the spot I loved best.

Poor old Dad, this will give him a blow, but it's a chance for a happy death. So good-bye until we meet in that happy land beyond the skies.

Good-bye from your loving brother,

Martin J. Burke

Costume Barracks,

Athlone,

January 20th, 1923

Dear sister Julia

Just a few lines bidding you the last farewell. On tomorrow morning myself, M. Walsh, M. Burke, H. Collins and Thomas Hughes will meet our death at the hands of Irishmen, still we are quite happy and contented, we have been to see a priest, we will hear them in the morning and receive the body and blood of our saviour tomorrow morning at 8 a.m. It will be the happiest hour of my life. I know this will come as a terrible shock to you. I fear your heart will break, I ask you not to grieve for me for it must be God's holy will that I should sacrifice my life for Ireland. It had been the dreams of my earliest youth, the music of the rifles have always been ringing in my ears since the day Ctd. L. Darcy handed me his revolver and said hold this. Rather than part [with] it lose your life first. This I was determined to do as you know the consequences now. Tell mother and father not to grieve for me for all I ask now is to pray for me. I would not like to hear ye crying when I am amongst the dead, tell all my companions to pray for me Julia. I ask you to wear these medals in memory of your dead brother. God bless and protect you from all danger, good-bye now until I meet you in Heaven.

— From your loving brother Stephen.

(To be continued)