

The Civil War in Galway

Part 9 of Nollaig O Gadhra's series to mark the 75th anniversary

WE now come to the Waldron notes as they relate to the black events in Tuam in April 1923, including the execution of six Republican soldiers in the Old Workhouse on April 11th.

Because of the sensitivity and sadness of the events, even on this 75th anniversary occasion, it is necessary to fill in the background but to let the entire report come from the notes collected over the years and penned for posterity by J.J. Waldron on the occasion of the 50th anniversary in 1972. But it is also necessary to give some sort of short national context.

By April 1923, according to Dorothy MacArdle "it had become known to the Free State Government that nearly all the leaders of the Republican Army were somewhere among the mountains of Tipperary and Waterford, and thousands of troops were concentrated on an encircling movement there". But I.R.A. chief of staff General Liam Lynch contended that the Western Division of the I.R.A. was less hard pressed than the Southern and that through these the situation might yet be retrieved. But Seán Hyde, who was in command in the West, was not able to attend the March I.R.A. convention in South Tipperary, nor was P.J. Rutledge, vice-president of the Republic, mandated to stand in for DeValera as necessary.

Dev had reported for duty as an ordinary volunteer during the Civil War, and though recognised universally as president of Sinn Féin and the Irish Republic, held the military rank of Adjutant to Seán Moylan, Cork No. 4 Brigade. However, plans were afoot for the purchase of mountain cannon from Germany and this, it was felt, would enable the guerrilla columns still entrenched in their own areas to continue, if not indefinitely, at least until the following autumn and winter. Meanwhile, DeValera was instructed (some say authorised!) to take necessary steps to draw up terms for an honourable peace.

It was agreed that the Army Executive would meet again on April 10th, 1923 when the Western delegates might be able to attend. But the early days of April were full of calamity for the Republican cause. The I.R.A. Adjutant General, Tom Derrig, another Mayo man, was captured in Dublin and wounded trying to escape. Then on April 10th on the slopes of the Knockmealdown Mountains, General Liam Lynch, on his way to the Convention, fell mortally wounded in the course of a skirmish with Free State troops at Crohan West, about three miles south-west of Newcastle. He was taken prisoner "among his loyal allies, the hills" and died that night. This phrase was used by DeValera in his message of tribute to the army, on the death of Lynch. What is less frequently recalled except in local folklore, is that the soldier who shot Lynch at long distance as he descended those hills for cover, is said to have shouted: "I have got the Long Fellow"!

On the following day, April 11th, 1923 came news of the six executions in Tuam.

Austin Stack, Kerry T.D. and member of the Republican cabinet, was captured on his way to the adjourned (again) meeting to discuss peace. A few days later, four more Republican commandants in the field were captured. The adjourned meeting of the I.R.A. executive finally met at Poulnacapple, near Mullinahone, Co. Tipperary on April 20th, 1923. Frank Aiken, from the Fourth Northern Division, operating in the Louth-Armagh-South Down area, became chief of staff, and he and three other commandants, Liam Pilkington and Seán Hyde from the West, and Tom Barry from Cork were sent to Dublin as a Special Army Council to get DeValera, as president of Sinn Féin and the Republic to announce the calling-off of hostilities. This he did after consulting the members of his Republican cabinet who were not in jail — P.J. Rutledge, M.P. Colivet and Donal O'Callaghan — on April 27th, 1923. Note that the decision was taken by the I.R.A. but announced by DeValera as president of Sinn Féin. A "dump arms" order was issued (not a decommissioning!) and the cease-fire came into operation on April 30th at midday. Both Aiken and the I.R.A. Army Council, as well as DeValera, outlined basic principles which they said were necessary if there was to be a "political way forward" for the solution of the terrible situation in which Ireland found itself at the end of the Civil War. These were:

1. The sovereignty of the Irish nation and the integrity of its territory are inalienable.
2. Any instrument purporting to the contrary is, to the extent of its violation of the above principle, null and void.

A rather stark and blunt declaration at a time when we again hear rumours and rumours of rumours about what the Irish nation might be asked to sacrifice from its Constitution as part of the latest attempt to bring peace within the flawed partition structures, originally laid down in the 1920 British Government of Ireland Act.

But these moves by Aiken and DeValera, on the death of Liam Lynch, came too late for the Tuam prisoners, who went to their death by firing squad on the same morning

that their chief of staff died from wounds apparently sustained when a Free State soldier thought he had "got the Long Fellow"!

We shall let the Waldron notes of the period, and the last letter of Francis Cunnane, one of the men who died for the Republic in Tuam, speak for themselves:

April 3rd, 1923

This week there was a sensational escape from Galway Jail by fourteen prisoners. There is no information as to their identity but it is reported that some of them are men awaiting a sentence. Searching enquiries are being made by the authorities and disciplinary action is threatened to be taken against any persons who are found responsible. This could mean the authorities think this escape was an outside job.

Civic Guards from Tuam in charge of Sergeant Roddy searched pubs in Headford on the 22nd Ult. and seized poteen found on the premises of Thady McHugh wrapped up in clothes in a box, one gallon of the liquid. There were also some small bottles of the stuff found in the house of Patrick Reilly.

Troops report that whilst operating between Headford and Galway they sent on ahead a motor with soldiers as decoy. As they proceeded, suddenly the Republicans appeared each side of the road and surrounded the motor, when the larger section of the troops put in appearance, the Republicans had to retreat, but not before fifteen were captured.

Attack on Headford on April 9th, 1923

A large scale attack by Republicans on the Military Post in Headford took place early in the morning of April 9th, 1923 and lasted nearly an hour.

It started at 1:15 a.m. when the Republicans came across the Corrib in boats from the Oughterard direction. They took up positions in Thady McHugh's public house which is opposite the Barrack, formerly the National Bank, and also the house of the local Minister nearby.

Two of the attackers in stockinged feet crossed the road and laid a mine on the wire entanglement in front of the Barrack door. When the bomb exploded it blew in the door and broke many windows in the area.

Shooting started from both sides immediately and the Military Gunner Sergt. Major Carty brought his machine gun into action in the direction of McHugh's house. The first fatality was on the Republican side when a young man named McCormack was badly wounded, having a part of his leg and arm torn away by a bullet.

After some time the firing ceased and during the calm a shout was heard calling on the troops to come out and fight.

Captain Nugent who was in charge immediately stepped out onto the road followed by Lieut. Burns and Gunner Carty with his machine gun.

They were not fully dressed as they were taken unawares and had not been long in bed.

Shooting started again and the first casualty was Sergt. Carty who was hit by a bullet, and died later in Galway Hospital. After some time it was noticed that the Republican forces were gradually retreating towards the Corrib. Captain Nugent got his men to make a thorough search of the area and they came across numerous patches of blood on the ground, following the trail they found a dead body in a nearby yard. It was the body of a well-known Tuam Republican Tom Higgins who in pre-Treaty days took an active part against the British.

Directing that the body be brought to the Barracks the Capt. continued the search through the Demesne, meeting up with about sixteen of the Republicans which they attacked but the machine gun jammed in the hands of the assistant gunner who himself was wounded and died the next day. The Republicans got clear away with their wounded leaving behind five rifles, twenty bombs, a battery and seven large cable wires, some coats and boots, they were all evidently in their stockinged feet. It was stated that the Republicans intended planting a second mine but when the engineers were called they did not respond. No explanation was given. The mine was found afterwards by the troops.

Capt. Nugent's forces had five wounded and two deaths, the latter from wounds. He must be given credit as a brave man for defending his post. A Clareman, he was an experienced fighter in the old days, especially in the ambushes against the British.

Lieut. Burns, a native of Clarenbridge, rushed out at first still in his bare feet.

Both Dr. Golding and Fr. Daly gave all the comfort and assistance they could to the wounded.

The body of John Higgins was brought to the Military Barracks, Tuam and later handed over to his relatives and after Requiem High Mass in the Cathedral was buried in the family plot in Kilbannon Graveyard.

The injured Republican soldier was

Lieut. Daniel McCormack of Milltown.

Six Executions in Tuam
Sequel to the Fight at Cluide near
Headford in February 1923

The following notice was issued on Wednesday morning from G.H.Q.

"James O'Malley, Oughterard, buried in Oughterard; Francis Cunnane, Kilcoona, Headford, buried in Donaghpatrick; John Newell, Winefort, Headford, buried in Donaghpatrick; John McGuire, Cross, Cong, buried in Cong; Michael Monaghan, Clooneen, Headford, buried in Donaghpatrick and Martin Moylan, Farmerstown, Annaghdown, buried in Donaghpatrick.

All the above were charged with having possession of a rifle and ammunition at Cluide on February 21st, 1923 without proper authority.

All six persons were found guilty. The findings were confirmed in each case and the prisoners were sentenced to death.

The executions were duly carried out in Tuam Military Barracks (Workhouse) on the morning of Wed., April 11th, 1923."

The men were executed in parties of three and met their death bravely as Christians and were resigned to the will of God. For proof of that fact, read the last letters from some of them written before their execution to relatives and friends.

They were attended during the night by two priests from the Tuam Presbytery and in the morning they all attended early Mass at which two of them served.

The priests were with them to the last and as each fell they were given the last rites as they fell.

The bodies were interred in the garden nearby.

The report of the six executions carried out in Tuam sent a gloom over the town. So unexpected, and tragic and indeed it can be said by one who was a resident of the town at the time that every single person felt the greatest sympathy for the families and relatives of the executed men.

Go ndéana Di trócaire ar a n-anamacha.
Rumour: One wonders why the executions were carried out in a small town like Tuam instead of some of the large centres? The answer may have been on account of the late events in Headford, as several of the executed men were from that area.

Last letter written by Frank Cunnane previous to his execution.

Workhouse, Tuam, April 11th, 1923

Dear Mother,

You are aware perhaps by now that I am one of the destined by God, to swell the roll of that martyred band who died for Ireland. I am going to my grave dying as I lived, believing that I did the best for my country and that the sacrifice will atone for anything left undone by me; that I have conscientiously done everything for the better interests of my country, according to my lights. I have not dread, therefore it is with composure I accept my sentence bearing no hatred against any living soul. To all my friends too numerous to mention, give them my best and sincerest love. For their many kindness during and after my intercourse with them, I am more than grateful and I trust that God will in some way repay them as I intended doing. But now that I am leaving them for a happier exchange, I am debarred from fulfilling my desire in this world of sorrows. Well Mother, I know my death will shock you and all at home, but my dying wish is that no grief or sorrow be unnecessarily displayed by any of you for the end must come some time and is as welcome now as at any future date. My death is a glorious one, and I am unworthy of it. There may be some who think our line of action a hopeless and foolish one, but the voices of Pearse and Plunkett and those who died for the same cause in 1916 inspired me to follow in their footsteps and I am confident the vindication of the sacred cause will come in some generation or another. Cheer up, Mother dear, I shall meet you in Heaven in the near future, though I hope your life on this earth shall be long and happy so much so that you will be recompensed in some small measure for your past and present worries. Give to all my neighbours and companions of my childhood my dying wish for their future welfare, and to my loyal comrades a fond farewell. And let no act of vengeance mar the cause for which I die. Let that sanctified flag be borne aloft unstained by the son of Cain, so that the world will see we are not waging a war of Bolshevism of which the I.R.A. are accused. I am sending you a few souvenirs including a pair of beads I got from Cissie during the Black and Tan regime. In them find consolation and do not worry.

Now I must conclude finally and eternally in this side of the grave So I send you Father, Cissie, Tessie, Bertie, Gerald, Willie, John, Tommie, Martin, Charles, Joe and Vincent my blessing and good wishes. May God bless all of you and may we all meet in Heaven, is the sincere wish of your dutiful and loving Son.

(To be continued)