

Tuam's sad role at the end of The Irish Civil War

BY NOLLAIG Ó GADHRA

THIS month of April marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the Irish Civil War. It effectively came about on 30th April, 1923, when the ceasefire and "Dump Arms" order of the new I.R.A. Chief of Staff, General Frank Aiken came into effect.

Aiken, who later spent several years as a Fianna Fáil Minister and Tánaiste, and is remembered in particular for his pursuit of an independent foreign policy in the United Nations in the 1960s, even when this annoyed the United States (as it did in the case of the vote on admitting Communist China to the Assembly) had succeeded to the leadership of the losing Republican side in the Civil War only a few weeks previously on the death of General Liam Lynch on 10th April, 1923.

But it has been obvious for some time that the vastly better-equipped and financed army of the Irish Free State had clearly won the war in the field. One of the most controversial and drastic methods used by the three-man Army Council of that Army, which operated at arm's length from any sort of political control, was the policy of executing prisoners taken in the field for possession of arms or ammunition — a power which was given to the army by the inter-regnum "Provisional Parliament" in October, even before the Irish Free State came

legally into existence on 6th December, 1922.

As soon as the state was founded on that date, the new government adopted even more drastic measures by simply executing prisoners who had been in jail since the surrender of the Four Courts the previous July, without any trial of any sort, and on a few hours notice, for offences committed outside the prison with which they could not possibly be connected.

The execution of Rory O'Connor, Dick Barrett, Liam Mellows and Joe McKelvey on 8th December, 1922 has, therefore, become part of the Republican lore of martyrdom. But the reality is that the policy of sentencing Republican prisoners of war to death and then delaying their execution and holding them as "hostages" against the behaviour of their supporters outside the jails, continued into the early months of 1923.

The policy consisted of shooting small numbers from specific counties or I.R.A. Command areas in an increasing litany of blood-letting that stretched out from Dublin throughout Leinster and Munster up to the end of January, 1923. Then there was a lull in February before the horrific tragedies of Kerry at Ballyseedy and other locations in March that were further compounded by the execution of three Kerry men and a Derryman at Drumbee, Co. Donegal on 14th March, 1923, even though these Volunteers had been sent North by Collins and G.H.Q. people like Dick Mulcahy to "Keep the border open" a few short years previously.

The Donegal executions were also the first by the Free State in Ulster.

Connacht had also escaped relatively unscathed although five members of the I.R.A. Western Command were executed in Athlone on 20th January, 1923. Then on 11th April, 1923 some six other Western Command Volunteers — the largest batch since before Christmas — were executed in Tuam, the capital

and very heart of Connacht in an incident that is as sad and was as futile as the other acts of blood-letting that took place in Tralee and Ennis at the end of the war and indeed three days after the ceasefire came into effect in the case of Co. Clare.

There have always been different rumours and "spins" put on the Tuam execution of Seamus Ó Máille (Oughterard), Frank Cunnane (Kilcoona, Headford), John Newell (Winefort, Headford), John Maguire (Cross, Cong), Michael Monaghan (Clooneen, Headford) and Martin Moylan (Farmerstown, Annaghdown), who were shot in the Old Workhouse in Tuam, on the morning after Liam Lynch was shot in the South.

Their fate and their sentence to death arose from a shoot-out with the Free State Army at Cluide, near Headford, on 21st February, 1923.

As the formal Free State G.H.Q. statement said at the time: "All the above were charged with 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 on Wednesday, April 11th, 1923.

What is not explained is the reason for the long delay from 21st February to 11th April. Nor are we told when the executions were "confirmed". Clearly it is a good example of sentencing prisoners to death and then holding the date of execution against the "good behaviour" of comrades of the sentenced men still in the field.

There is also a popular theory of course that the Free State Army Council and those in control at the top made sure that some executions would take place in each command throughout the country so that responsibility for the 'famous "77"' would be shared by all the commands throughout the state, and that there would be nobody after the war who could claim that "he only

obeyed orders" or that they were not directly involved in the executions as well as the policy.

In that regard Connacht had, up to Tuam in mid-April, escaped relatively lightly. As I wrote in *Civil War in Connacht*, (Mercier Press 1999):

The six executions in Tuam were the largest number of I.R.A. prisoners to be put to death in one centre since seven (Stephen White, Joseph Johnston, Patrick Mangan, Patrick Nolan, Brian Moore, James O'Connor and Patrick Bagnel) has been shot in Dublin, just before Christmas on 19th December, 1922. They also brought the total placed before firing squads by the Free State authorities to 71. Given that they were all locals and that they were shot, rather unexpectedly, in the smallest town of Tuam in the heart of rural Connacht, the impact was enormous. Frequently, there have been suggestions that the executions were arranged for the Tuam workhouse rather than Renmore barracks in Galway because the Catholic bishop of Galway had just died, about that time and General Mulcahy in particular, a practising Catholic all his life, could not tolerate the idea of blood-letting in the city while the bishop was being mourned.

The attack on Headford, two days previously, sealed the fate of the six men who had been in custody for almost two months, and had been sentenced to death 'on hold' like many others at the time. Free State apologists will claim that the decision to execute 'was the fault' of those who remained active outside the prisons. Republican apologists suspect that certain members of the Free State command in the west had also to be forced to taste execution blood and half a dozen executions in an area like Tuam would frighten all but convinced Republicans that the cause was not worth the risk. Some Republicans even go so far as to suggest that the line-up in the Free State firing squad in Tuam was interesting, that some people were brought in from Mayo — to spread the

fear and the involvement of all — including some officers of northern origins. Be that as it may, the reality was that by mid-April 1923 the Civil War was almost over and the ceasefire announcement came into force on 30th April, 1923.

As for the impact of the executions themselves, we can do no better than quote from the *Connacht Tribune* dated Saturday, 14th April, 1923:

'On Monday morning (9.4.23), the Bishop of Galway, Dr. O'Dea died and so followed a period of mourning which last until his funeral on Thursday, April 12th. On Tuesday, John Higgins was buried in Kilbannon Cemetery after Mass in Tuam. The same day, six men were taken aside in Galway Jail and told they would be executed at 8.00 a.m. the next day, not in Galway, but in Tuam workhouse'. It then lists the six volunteers and continues: 'They were brought from Galway to Tuam workhouse that evening. They wrote their final letters, got Mass and in two groups of three, lined up by the Oratory Wall and were executed early on April 11th, 1923'. The *Connacht Tribune* of the following Saturday, 14th April, along with details of the bishop's funeral, in Galway, describes the events in Tuam as follows: 'The condemned men, it is stated, went to their doom firmly and with brave hearts. They had been attended during the night by two of the town priests and in the morning heard Mass, at which two of them served. The priests were with them to the last.

'The news of the executions cast a gloom over the people who could hardly realise what awful happenings had taken place in their midst that morning. About 8.00 a.m. two volleys were fired and it is stated that the condemned men were taken out in parties of three each, and blindfolded and their hands joined as in prayer. They had prayed fervently during the night before and in the morning and were fully consoled, prepared to meet their Creator. The six bodies, enclosed in six coffins were

interred in the ground within the barracks, and it is stated that the ground was consecrated. No official information of the executions would be issued to the press.'

When the Free State Army vacated the Tuam workhouse towards the end of 1923, they exhumed the bodies of the six and brought them to Athlone, headquarters of the Western Command of the new triumphant Free State 'National Army'. This was greatly resented, but all requests to return the bodies to the relatives were ignored by the Cosgrave government until the autumn of 1924 when, faced with a number of by-elections, throughout the state, it was decided to hand back the remains of all 77 who had been shot on the orders of the Free State Army Council, independent of all judicial or even political control, during the Civil War. Those who seek to vilify Liam Lynch and the other I.R.A. leaders and who suggest that shooting on sight was the only answer to those who engaged in such highly irregular conduct, even by the normal rules of warfare, should recall that those 'democrats' who handed over the power to the army at that time — and before the Irish Free state even founded — were effectively washing their hands of the responsibility they themselves said they had as a Provisional Government and parliament, and handing it over to a three-man junta. Any two members of the Army Council could sanction the execution of anybody they did not like. Erskine Childers is the saddest example of this, not only because of the shameful way he was put to death before his appeal to the high court was even considered, but also because the propaganda against the 'damned Englishman' who had converted to the Republican cause, was so blind and prejudiced.

*Nollaig Ó Gadhra will sign copies of his *Civil War in Connacht* in Hughes & Hughes Bookshop, Galway Shopping Centre on Saturday, 12th April from 2.30 p.m.

