

# Flight from Connemara in 1922

The extract reprinted here is from *The Book of Talbot*, written by Violet Clifton and published by Faber & Faber, 1933.

*this intriguing episode, Violet is accused by the IRA of involvement in an ambush occurring between Kylemore, where the Cliftons resided, and Leenaun. She is consequently ordered to leave Connemara promptly – or ‘steps will be taken’.*

Violet wished that she could telegraph to Talbot telling him not to return, but realized that she could not send any telegram. She decided the following day she would go to Galway so as to hire a car to take away the old family racing-cups, and the like.

So she drove the black horse fifteen miles to Recess. A torrent of rain was falling. At Recess she took the train for Galway, and went to one she called ‘her mother and her father’ – that was Martin MacDonogh, a merchant of Galway. His brother Thomas, more cautious than Martin, thought that the MacDonoghs would be wiser to stand clear of this trouble, but Martin asked if Violet had telegraphed to her husband to advise him not to return.

Martin said: ‘I’ll strengthen your counsel by also telegraphing to him. I’ll send you home in this motor-car; it will be followed by a lorry for your goods – clear the house of everything.’ ‘Most of the things are already packed,’ Violet answered. She returned to Kylemore, and soon afterwards the lorry arrived, and the silver was packed into it. She was getting out of her bath, refreshed after the dreadful wetness of her clothes, when a trembling maid knocked and said through the door: ‘The armed men are back – you must go to them, they have a letter for you.’ ‘Give me my long black dress,’ she answered, and when she had put it on she walked downstairs to the men waiting in the hall. The lorry was still by the door. Looking on the pictures which hung along the wall of the staircase she reflected: ‘Being of to-day, I think it terrible to have armed men waiting for me, yet, had I lived in olden days in a besieged city, the enemy might have been for years about our walls. In spite of them I should have thought it worth while to work at tapestry and to gather books about me.’ Now she stood on the bottom step looking down on the men; even on the threshold, because of her height, she looked down, and she felt glad that it was so. She needed such petty support, for her hand almost trembled as she took the letter:–‘but it shall not tremble,’ she willed. Surely the letter would be her arrest? The men would take her to Westport,

Talbot would come to redeem her and would be shot – this she was sure must be the sequence. She read:

ÓGLAIGH NA H-ÉIREANN.

Headquarters,  
4th Western Division,  
Castlebar.  
14/4/22.

To:  
Mrs. Clifton,  
Kylemore,  
Connemara.

On the night of the 12th April, 1922, your husband Talbot Clifton with others who are known to me lay in ambush at a point on the main road between Kylemore and Leenaun, and fired at officers of this division who were proceeding to Castlebar.

As a result of the shots fired, Captain Eugene Gilan of the Irish Republican Army is now hovering between life and death in Mr. McKeown's Hotel, Leenaun. I am satisfied, from information received, that you also participated in the ambush, and this is to notify you that an armed guard will be placed on your premises, and that you, Mrs. Clifton, are to leave Connemara before 12 noon Monday, 27th, 1922. Otherwise other steps will be taken.

If you desire to make any statement it will be necessary for you to come to Castlebar, and I promise you a safe conduct.

Signed, Michael Kilroy,

G.O.C. 4th Western Division, I.R.A.

N.B.: The armed guard will remain on your premises pending the return of your husband.

There was no train on Sunday and the Monday train from Recess left after noon, therefore its departure would be outside of the time granted to her. Was this a trap? The chief man said that all now belonged to them – to the Sinn Féiners – Violet must give him the key of the cellar. The men would live in the house from now onwards; the servants would serve them, or go. 'If these men get drunk we are undone,' she thought. She said sharply: 'You must not frighten my children, therefore you will take the servants' rooms in the new building behind this house.' Then she called the children, played a game with them and sent them to bed. But, in spite of her endeavour, the younger children were frightened, because a man with a rifle walked up and down the nursery passage; they were frightened too because the nurse lost her calm and cursed the men in God's name. 'My last mistress was shot before my eyes by men like these,' said Ellen, the maid, as she helped Violet to pack away the old china and the household treasures. 'You may take nothing with you,' said the head-man but Violet set aside four things to take.

Because of its loveliness she took the Japanese Princess, made of gold lacquer and of ivory, carrying a basket with roses of ivory; because it was the trophy of their march through Celebes she took the head of the *Bos Anoa*. Also she hid, and took away, the billiard-cue that was balanced more perfectly than any other Talbot had ever played with. For herself she took the copy of Shakespeare which had been Talbot's first gift. Then the priest from Tully came and supped with her, but the villains burnt his bicycle to point the reality of their displeasure against this woman who had opposed them.

Next day, the Sinn Féiners having consented, she hired a car and went away. She took with her the nurse and an English maid, the four children that were in Ireland, and a dog or two. The ponies, the setter-dogs, the hens, the old silver from Lytham, the pictures and everything in the house was left behind. As she drove along the road to Recess, Violet looked at the children of this unruly people, at the little children laying along the roadside. 'Europe is full of such,' she thought, 'and will these children grow up to fight my children?' Having seen revolution she shuddered. The only person in the countryside who dared to call a blessing on her was the mother of the twins.

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In a friend's house in Lancashire Violet and the children joined Talbot. Till she came he had been as one demented wondering 'was she safe?' cursing himself for having brought this upon her. He was restrained from returning by Martin MacDonogh's telegram. When they did come together, he said: 'You might well leave me for ever after this.' So used was he to dangers that, at first, the hazard had seemed but small, and he had not reckoned that it would fall so heavily on his wife.

One night in Lancashire he saw Violet knotting sheets together so that if the wretches came to kill him she could let him down from the window. He laughed away her cares, saying: 'I'm damned if I will sleep without sheets.' But he understood that fear had blasted her; and he again repented.

For a year they were under the special protection of the police, in case a Sinn Féiner might come over and in revenge shoot Talbot. Strange warnings reached them; a barber at Liverpool said to a friend of Violet's: 'A man is coming for the Squire of Lytham.' On Christmas Eve a watchful policeman found an Irishman in hiding close to Lytham Hall, whither the Cliftons had returned.

'God bless the house from roof to floor – the twelve Apostles guard the door.' Every night Violet prayed so for Kylemore, and the nuns too prayed.

Talbot said: 'the Devil looks after his own.' Conboy had been arrested by Coneely and put into prison, but afterwards he was freed.

After a year of vicissitude, suddenly Coneely wrote to Talbot: 'We are beaten by the Free State men. We promised there should be no revenge. All the people here spoke for you; so you can come back. Your goods shall be restored; the people want you to stand as member for Galway' – something like that he wrote. The silver – which had been like litter on the floor of a barracks at the neighbouring town of Clifden and afterwards had been sent back to Kylemore House – the pictures, the books, almost everything was still at Kylemore House – the things had been ill used but not stolen or destroyed.



*O'Malley Rally 2003: Catherine O'Malley O'Reilly (incoming Chieftain) with her mother Bridget and Tim Quinn, Chairman of Mayo County Council.*

(Photo: Michael O'Malley)