

CHAPTER NINE

THE HARD ROAD TO
CARROWKENNEDY

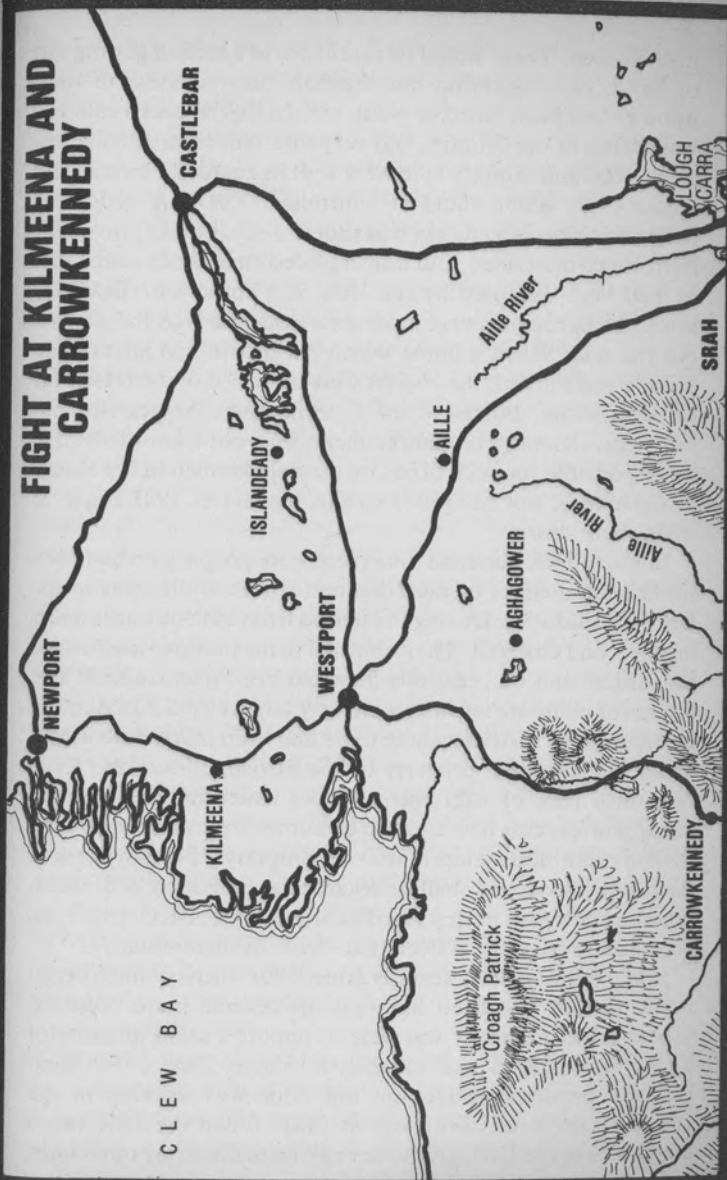
MAY—JUNE 1921

IRA morale would depend on previous fights in which either officers or men had taken part, or on any resoluteness or determination gained over the past years during the routine training of a Volunteer company in combating enemy aggression. Gaol experience, with its resultant combination of ingenuity, improvisation and discipline, could also make an important contribution. Indeed these three factors were a natural foundation on which a column could be built. Gaol, in addition, brought men into arduous contact with others who were regarded as leaders, or with those who afterwards evolved in control. Gaol was a testing ground in which qualities were severely tried in a vacuum, to fruit or to wither.

Discipline in the service of a cause is very different from parade discipline, and weapon assurance based on thorough and efficient use which creates its own reliability and dependence, was lacking in many IRA column men. A personal discipline growing from independence of mind could develop a degree of self-reliance and a sense of responsibility. Each IRA section had to depend utterly on itself. There was rarely a chance of a unit in action being reinforced as there were no fixed points from which help could be summoned. Each section of a column was its own base, dependent on its fighting qualities and its knowledge of ground. That extra quality, intimate knowledge of land, could and did give assurance and certitude. It was almost an instinct which could free the mind for other problems. A friendly people, who in sound areas observed every enemy movement and covertly were aware of suspects, helped to create a sense of security and protection which could be of use to armed men.

Officers or men seldom drank and the greatest punishment for a column Volunteer was that of being summarily returned to

CLEW BAY



his battalion. There would be no chance of a section getting out of hand, or of carrying out reprisals because some of their number had been killed or wounded. In this respect a column, wandering in the country, was very different from Auxiliaries, Tans, RIC and military who were kept in guarded barracks and whose every action could be controlled. The IRA stood over their activities. If a civilian was shot as a spy, he had previously been court-martialled, and a label placed on his body stated that he had been executed by the IRA. If a house was visited for arms, the occupants were made aware that the IRA had carried out the raid. When a house which the British had intended to occupy was burned, the owners were informed of the reason for its destruction. Forces of the Crown, when they carried out burnings, shootings or maltreatment, were not acknowledged to be responsible for such deeds by their spokesmen in the House of Commons, not until evidence in January of 1921 began to track them down.

In every IRA battalion area there were people who had been traditional enemies of the Irish and whose loyalty was to the British authorities. During the period from 1918 onwards many loyalists had changed. They objected to the punitive methods of the British and on occasions they had been manhandled. The houses of obdurate loyalists were easy targets for the IRA, more particularly in districts where there had been much destruction of houses and other property by the British military and RIC. Not until June of 1921 was an order issued by IRA General Headquarters that houses could be burned in any area where the British were destroying houses or property: 'For purposes of such reprisal no one shall be regarded as an enemy of Ireland, whether they may be described locally as Unionist, Orangeman, etc., except they are actively anti-Irish in their actions.'

Some brigades were scantily armed, but when columns began to be formed the need for weapons became more pressing. General Headquarters was able to import a small quantity of arms, ammunition and explosives. There were a few hand grenade factories in Dublin, but none was working in the country except in Cork early in 1921. When the IRA swore allegiance to the Dáil, grants were given to the Army but money

was not forwarded to brigades. Each brigade paid for whatever warlike equipment it received from the Quartermaster-General. Headquarters officers and attached staffs, men of the Intelligence Squad and in the Dublin Active Service Unit were paid organisers, and I think a column in Cork city was paid, but in the rest of the country, Volunteers, column men and officers served freely. Brigades raised money to clothe their columns and the Cumann na mBan provided them with medical equipment and cigarettes. Country people, many of whom had helped to over-subscribe the Dáil Loan, fed columns, men on the run and an increasing number of full-time battalion officers.

The disconcerting point about a flying column was that there had been no precedent for its organisation and use ever since the days of the Tories and Rapparees whose area of action had been wider, perhaps because distrustful elements in the population broadened its range. Nor could a General Headquarters in Dublin give guidance in the use of such a body of men. There was no stereotyped standard of training or efficiency, and with very few exceptions men who had been trained in the British Army and who had been through active service were not put in charge of IRA active service units. Example in other counties was a stimulus and incentive, but individual experience in the employment of the new unit had to be learned in every brigade. In each battalion, by the autumn of 1920, there were men who were being raided for by the British. Raids meant a condition of alertness at home while a man carried out his normal work, but as raids increased men had to leave their homes which had become too obvious a target. Their time could now be given to Army work, and as they moved through the country they learned adequately how to protect themselves; should they be officers, local companies were given experience of guard duties. Officers and men were by this time inclined to carry arms or side-arms with them and such familiarity ensured respect and a regard for their care.

At times in good districts the countryside was on the alert from the moment the hum of a lorry was heard in the distance. A column then was able to avail itself of men who had a training in security, of a company system of alertness to protect wanted

men, and it profited by the awareness of friendly people who acted as voluntary scouts.

The West Mayo Column was not formed until the spring of 1921. It comprised what had been independent battalion columns based on Castlebar, Westport and Newport, the three principal towns in the Brigade area. For some months before the amalgamation these units had been in the field, anxious for an opportunity to test their strength against the British. Such columns, coming late into the fight, had to meet an enemy now on the alert and inclined to take few chances. By degrees the military and RIC had become better equipped, and their transport, communications and intelligence had been reorganised. In one sense soldiers who are fighting each other mature automatically in the ways of war. One project is countered with another and in this fashion their military education develops. Now, Mayo columns had to plunge into the full current of ruthlessness without that gradual build-up of knowledge and competence. Lessons had to be learned quickly and mistakes were more obvious and produced a swifter nemesis than they would have done in 1920.

After the three independent columns had coalesced in the hills at Aille, south-west of Westport, to form the Brigade Column, Michael Kilroy, the Column Commander, found it far from easy to locate suitable enemy elements to attack. The Column had lain in ambush frequently but without avail, largely because of difficulty in getting information about the hour when convoys travelled. IRA groups had gone into Castlebar, Westport and Newport to attack police or military patrols, but they had failed to make contact. Then, during a subsequent incursion into Newport, an RIC sergeant was killed and a constable wounded. The sergeant had been sniped at across the river from some four hundred yards as he worked his way through the intricate maze of barbed wire which guarded the front of the barracks.

That same night the Castlebar Column, under Paddy Jordan, had made its way as far as the village of Ballinacarrigan among the lakes between the three towns and moved quietly into the scattered houses, unaware that the Newport Column had

arrived at the neighbouring houses that evening and was already in bed. This was a safe area where the people were friendly and evidently careful of their talk, as the district had never been raided, either when a column was there or when it had temporarily left its shelter. Paddy Jordan soon met Michael Kilroy and as they talked news came in about the killing of the Newport sergeant. Kilroy knew that as a result of the shooting there would be much enemy activity that night and the following day. Indeed his own house had already flamed to the sky, with another for company, and a British punitive patrol might be expected any time on the hill road between Newport and Castlebar, or on the road between Westport and Newport. He decided to turn out the Westport men and bring them at once to a good position at Kilmeena, which he thought they could occupy that morning with reasonable prospects of engaging the enemy. The men were impatient to get in a really good crack at the British, and this new move born of the events in Newport seemed more certain of positive result than the random operations that had so far been carried out by the Brigade and battalion columns.

Dawn brought a cold wind which ruffled the scent of hawthorn across the line of march, and bird-song made a cheerful prelude for some of the tired men. By first light the Column, having eaten on the way, was at the crossroads close to the Knocknaboly bridge. Men lay down to rest while some of the officers walked the ground and examined positions to hold against alternative British approaches. At first, they had occupied a site commanding the road bridge over the railway line. There was a right-angle bend at either approach to the bridge and that meant a slowing down of lorries and an almost certain collision if a driver was injured at that point. Although a good position for shotgun men to hold, it was decided against remaining there as one flank would be exposed. The earth-work protection necessary to render the site safe as shelter from rifle fire would take time to build up, and these preparations might also attract attention.

The main ambush position was eventually chosen to the south, below Knocknaboly crossroads and about forty yards in

from the road. A rough blockade was placed a little distance down the road which the men had come along that morning, to prevent lorries from suddenly turning the flank of the ambush position. Behind a bank the men waited, while across the road at another bank Dr. John Madden and a comrade acted as flankers. Beyond the brow of the hill to the south of the position and in the Newport direction, an outpost of four men could dominate the Newport road from a ridge about a hundred feet above road level. On a hill to the north about eight hundred yards away towards Westport, there was an observer who would signal a British approach by firing his automatic pistol. If, however, there were two lorries he could not use this signal until the second lorry had reached his position. In that event the ambush section would have very little time to ready themselves for the first lorry. This was an unusual method of signalling information. The sharp crack of an automatic could be heard by the men in ambush but it would be more audible to the approaching British.

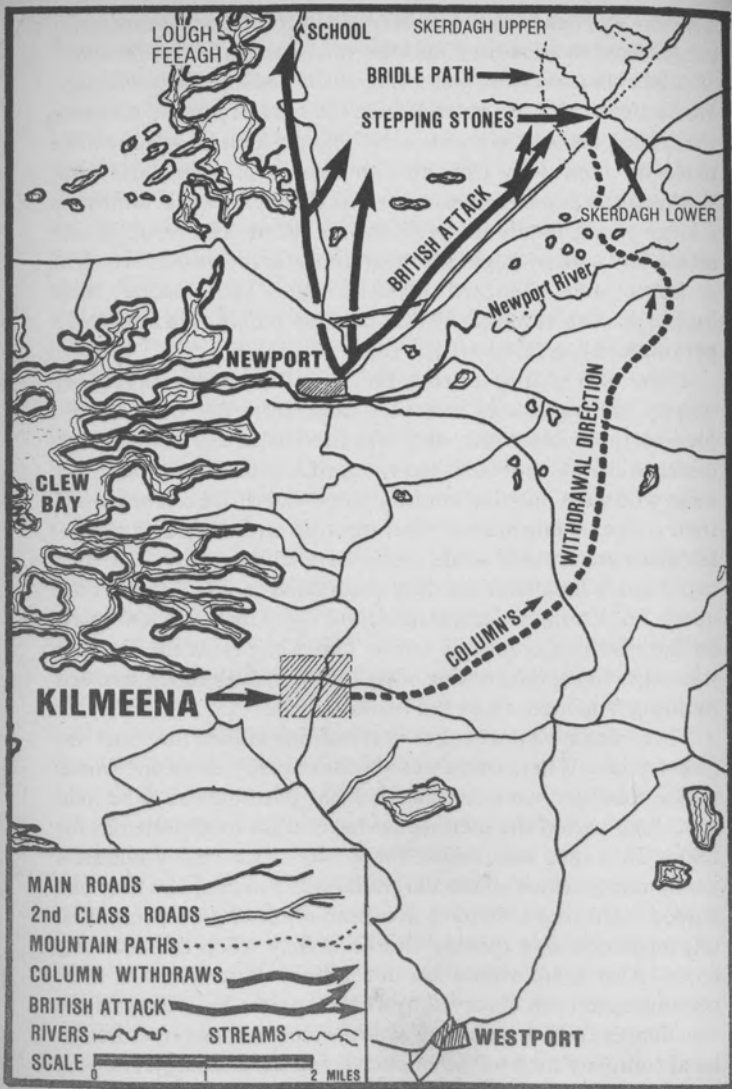
Men lay down behind the bank. There was a fair number of shotguns sprinkled among the riflemen. The effectiveness of the first volley might well depend on the support that could be given by the shotguns if the lorry drivers were not either killed or wounded by the riflemen and the transport brought to a standstill inside the field of fire. The men were alert at the beginning but as the morning hours became monotonously long their attention was diverted by time and fatigue. In front and around them circled the low hills of Kilmeena, called Drumlins. They had been formed from glacial clay on the edges of ice sheets, and duplicated shapes when continued out to sea had become the islands in Clew Bay. The rounded hills pushed up in gentle even curves, embodying something of the sea as if whales had surfaced at intervals. Beyond the ridge of land the blue mountain height of Clare Island marked off the entrance to the Bay, closing it to the outside sea swell. The Rock topped the intervening hills to the south in a steep blue-white pyramid of granite which exaggerated the impression of bulk and height. To the north and north-east was the half-circle of mountains from Corraun that ends in the isolated granite cone of Nephin.

The day was heady in the drowsy warmth of May and that again contributed to relax tired muscles and to weaken concentration.

A local house-owner was aware of the Column in his vicinity. He had been striding up and down the road in protest, thinking that if he persisted in front of the held position he would either drive the men away from this ambush or prevent them from firing on the British. He was anxious about his 'weak' family, as a large young family in the West was called. The result of any attack on a convoy might mean for him later the burned wreck of a house and a crowd of RIC and Tans taking their indiscriminate revenge on him and his family. He had to be peremptorily ordered off the road.

There was a time during the long wait when fingers lay tensely on triggers as two cars came over the bridge from Newport, but before any shot was fired what had looked in the distance as RIC uniforms had changed into the black mantles of nuns who were on a day's outing connected with a celebration in their order. A murmur of relief went up after they had passed, for one random shot could easily have led to others. The men had been a long time in their places and it was approaching noon. The Commander was now thinking of moving them away. In the nearby Cummins's house Tim Kelly from the Column was supervising the cooking of eight fowl in the kitchen, assisted by hungry helpers from the banks outside.

There was always a danger in remaining hidden for hours in a countryside. Where there were houses nearby, someone would notice that men were concealed. If the position was to be held for a long period the men would have to get food prepared for them. In a long occupation there was a risk that Volunteers would not continue on the alert indefinitely, and unless they had a good signalling system to give ample warning they might be unprepared to fire quickly and accurately when the necessity arose. Also there would be uncertainty as to whether their presence had been observed by a casual passer-by. Always there was danger from a travelling tinker, tramp or beggar, although local company men would at once recognise a stranger, be able to estimate his possible risk and then, if necessary, put him under temporary arrest. A more immediate danger might come



from information let slip to a pensioned RIC man

Kilroy had not decided whether or not to withdraw, when the enemy's arrival was suddenly signalled by two shots from the scout on the Westport side. Some of the men were asleep and were awakened by the firing. Others were able to get in a shot at the lorry as the driver pressed hard on the accelerator, making the vehicle sway uneasily as it took the curves to and from the bridge in a blaze of dust. Then it disappeared from sight, after about two hundred and fifty yards. Rifle shots from the outpost position on the hill towards the north indicated that the speeding lorry had run into further fire.

Above at the bridge on the Westport road, near the parish priest's house, a second police lorry and a motor car had been halted when the firing was heard. Inside in the priest's house a clerical conference was taking place and the Canon's car was parked outside on the road. RIC men got down from the lorry and grouped in stereotyped musketry fashion on the road, with knees bent and right arms at right angles in the correct manual positions, but a few shots in their direction made them scatter hurriedly across the road to take up a posture more determined by the contours of a bank than by a sergeant major's lesson in musketry instruction.

Soon a police Lewis gun was drumming an arc of bullets from a distance of over seven hundred yards. They spattered the hill beyond Tailor Flynn's and may have worried the further IRA outpost position, for fire from that observation post soon ceased. The men there had withdrawn though the Column men near the road were unaware of that development; however, they soon knew they were being fired on from the railway bridge beyond the tailor's. This site was quickly made uncomfortable for the police, for at some two hundred and fifty yards range a police cap and the head inside it perched nicely in relief above the straight parapet of the bridge. Lewis gunfire from the bridge then covered the police as they moved into a new position behind the tailor's house, one more dangerous to the Column. The hedge behind the house was continued by a small bohieren sheltered by a new sod fence which permitted flanking fire to be directed against the bank held by the IRA.

Michael Kilroy ordered his men to fall back to the bank behind them. Madden's position now became untenable and as he went further down into the small valley a Tan leapt forward over a bank to the east of the tailor's house to get a better aim at him. As the Tan steadied his rifle he was shot by Kilroy. The doctor reached the road, crossed it under sniping fire and came up the slope where the main body of the Column was withdrawing. His face was covered with blood on either cheek and it was thought he had been seriously wounded until his own reassurance convinced the others that splinters of gravel from a ricochet bullet had been splattered against his face.

Along the spine of the second bank, to which Kilroy had withdrawn his men, another bank ran at right angles to the main road. From both sides of it banks stemmed at intervals, going downhill. There were gaps in this bank, sometimes as wide as fifty yards, where the IRA men were exposed to the RIC positioned beside the priest's house as well as to those who lay snugly behind the bank along the little bohereen beyond the tailor's house. Tailor Flynn heard the English accent of the Tans among the police as they shouted and cursed in excitement, but the Irish brogue of the RIC played as strongly a part. 'Creegan, keep well over here,' he could hear an English voice exclaim. 'You're a good shot.'

Creegan, a Westport RIC man who had recently been made a sergeant, did not long survive this fight. A Tan was shot through the eye at the back of the tailor's house and an RIC man was wounded nearby.

The RIC had an open valley between them and the Column's line of retreat, broken at intervals by banks, but no police seemed anxious to advance on the flank under cover and cut off this path of withdrawal. They lay down in the seemingly secure positions from which they could fire at ease. Perhaps a few casualties had made them more cautious, but they could with safety have continued along their ridge for over a mile.

John Staunton and James MacEvilly of the Column were fatally wounded at the second bank. MacEvilly probably bled to death there. Paddy Jordan suddenly rolled under some briars, but came out when called upon by his senior officer and lay

beside him quietly. Kilroy did not know then that Jordan was so badly wounded as he later discovered him to be, and he moved back with him towards the next bank. Paddy Mulloy of Newport was wounded on the way back as the IRA slowly retired. About three hundred yards further away a slight rise of ground above the diagonal bank hid the men from the view of the RIC near Father Conway's house, and also gave protection to the Column men from the Tans and constabulary in the bohoreen at the back of the tailor's house, where esconsed men were watching for movement along the banks to the east.

At the third bank and lower down towards the valley, Kilroy found Paddy O'Malley whose shin had been shattered by a bullet. O'Malley was able to advise him on what part of the next bank police rifles were sighted, for he had observed the effect of their fire on men who had crossed in front of him. Tom Nolan, who lay nearby, had been wounded in the leg, and an unwounded Westport Column man named Pierce insisted on remaining behind with him. Jordan, though dazed, moved slowly onwards but he seemed to have the concentrated detachment of a sleepwalker. Kilroy took O'Malley's rifle, the foresight of which was to one side. Its owner had learned to use it accurately by allowing for the distortion, but in the suddenness of action the handicap might sometimes prevail. Kilroy tested the rifle a few times until he was satisfied with it. He could hear the police calling to each other as they came nearer, but he remained with the wounded as long as possible, firing whenever a target offered. Eventually he had to leave them behind, together with Pierce, for it was impossible for him to move them. When he was some distance away he heard the excited shouts of the RIC. Like hounds baying a quarry they had come across the wounded. They fired at Mulloy as he lay on the ground and they put a number of bullets through the soft tissues of his leg. Luckily for him they hit no bones. Whether Pierce suffered from a sudden shock which upset his judgment cannot be clear. He was never again seen by those who knew him and his fate has remained unknown. He had volunteered his services to the Westport Column when it was neither safe nor opportune for a man to belong to such a unit. Afflicted with a

sudden mental breakdown he may have been racked by indecision, although to his Column Commander he seemed to be normal enough when he had last spoken to him.

When the Tans came up to the bank where Paddy O'Malley lay he heard them discuss himself and Nolan from a state of semi-consciousness. At first it was intended to shoot him where he lay but they decided that he and another of the wounded would die anyhow, and that ammunition could be saved. Tans and RIC pulled him down by the arms across fields and over banks while pain from the shattered bones shook his ebbing strength. When they reached the lorry they threw him in on top of the dead and wounded. They hauled Jordan by the legs and hoisted him in among his comrades like a sack of potatoes. In all, the RIC had collected four Column dead — James Mac Evilly and Tom O'Donnell of Castlebar, John Staunton of Kilmeena and Seán Collins of Westport — and five wounded, all of whom lay together in the lorry until the RIC were ready to return to Westport.

At the tailor's house the police demanded hot water for their wounded, and they took a blanket from his bed into which they swung their dead Tan. Prior to this a Tan had pointed a revolver at the tailor, ready to shoot, but another Tan struck up the levelled Colt and Flynn was ransomed by nothing worse than the wallop of a gun barrel on his head. The Tan who had saved him picked up a scapular which he wrapped around his wrist. 'Mother,' he said to the woman of the house, 'this may save me.'

The Column men counted their own losses as they moved away into the narrow valley approaches of Clogher. Two of the wounded, Michael Hughes and James Swift, both of Castlebar, were put to bed. Swift had been shot through the foot and he had been linked out of action. Nurse Joyce, home on holidays, tended the wounded under the direction of Dr. Madden. Kilroy had a talk with Madden. They both felt that they would be followed up in daylight and that they had best get outside of the triangle formed by Castlebar, Westport and Newport. The men were too tired and their morale too shaken for the long tramp to Aghagower which was in the hills, away from enemy posts and

well isolated by bad surrounding roads. So Skerdagh, on the outskirts of the Nephin Beg range, was decided on as their place of refuge. It was a sound area, isolated at the butt of the mountains and backed by a waste of hills and difficult hill country devoid of roads. The wounded were placed on horseback and the Column moved away towards Derryloughan at one o'clock in the morning. They crossed the stepping stones over the Newport river, and when they reached Skerdagh the wounded went to a house in the upper village and Column men were billeted throughout Lower Skerdagh.

The officers were worried over the Column's losses, and the dead men's comrades ached at their memory. The death of a man would be reflected in his own townland. To his companions in arms and to his neighbours it would seem as if a portion of a hill they were familiar with from boyhood had suddenly disappeared from their remembered landscape. Success could sometimes be bought too dearly at the cost of a few Volunteers. IRA planning was based on avoiding casualties as far as it was possible to do so, and even in action this liability often had an influence on operations. This fear of loss and a reluctance to attack in the open were two factors which affected the Irish when competing with stereotyped soldiers.

Rumours of the treatment of the prisoners had come in from Westport. The wounded bodies and the sandwiched dead had been thrown down on the street outside the police barracks for a considerable time. Then the bodies were dragged inside. This indifference to dead and injured was probably meant to overawe the townspeople and to stress how incontrovertible was police authority. It may, however, have been contempt acidulated by victory. Even people friendly to the British in the town and neighbourhood were shocked rather than pleased or awed. Westport and Castlebar had been strongly held since Stuart times. The presence of Sligos and Lucans on confiscated Irish lands had meant an accumulation of relatives, adherents and servitors, and in all settled garrison towns possession and an element of snobbery bound together dominance and its underlings. The Marquis of Sligo had gone into the barracks to protest against the disregard for wounded prisoners.

Auxiliaries, Tans, RIC and military, in that order, ignored or neglected IRA wounded. It was perhaps unusual for police, soldiers or civilians to pay attention to the fallen, as uninstructed men are hesitant about handling the injured. Unless an army medical officer was present, wounds had to depend on the clotting ability of blood for protection. Column men, however, had nearly always looked after the wounded as soon as a fight was over, and whether a man was a former enemy or a friend seemed to make no difference in the care they received.

The people among whom the Column was billeted were equally solicitous and there the men felt secure, knowing that they were well posted against the broad extent and steep reaches of the mountains behind them. Yet they were thoroughly on the alert as each man had learned what protection implied from the bitter memories of their recent experiences.

Dr. Madden had returned from a Liverpool hospital earlier that year. He had reported to Dr. MacBride, an old Fenian, in Castlebar. Despite MacBride's protests about foolishness, this shooting behind hedges (with remarks parroted from the British and their adherents), and the moral guilt of ambush which he reiterated from the denouncements of practically all bishops and many priests, his assistant surgeon borrowed his bicycle and disappeared. It was natural enough for a senior surgeon to be irritated when a junior threw his prepared future away and acted summarily on his own authority, but it was most unusual for a professional man to be attached to a column, either as a doctor or engineer. Towns in Mayo had not been continuously shaken by the British through burnings, shooting of men in bed, or through killings of prisoners said to have tried to escape. The ingrained garrison adherence yet had some strength, although the countryside would quickly respond to a more remote allegiance associated with any attempt for freedom. John Madden joined in a fighting capacity and he proved his worth, but his technical skill gave great heart to the men. To a column commander who had many unusual responsibilities the immediate lack of care of the wounded bit at his nerves. Now this worry could be transferred. Madden was an additional asset as he was able to advise and help the people amongst whom he

moved. Some immediate return could therefore be made for the many kindnesses given to the Column by the country people.

James Swift, who had limped out of action with a bullet through his foot, was operated on by Madden in Upper Skerdagh. The kitchen was cleared of the family. On a recently well-washed deal table, with Michael Kilroy as his untutored anaesthetist and assistant, two toes were removed.

The men rested for three days among the scattered cottages in the mountains. From their security of height they could watch the lower ground. A village in the mountain district, as in most parts of hilly Mayo, was not a collection of homesteads side by side, but a scattering of thatched cottages and slated houses over an area of a mile maybe. Sometimes a few families might build together and use the same yard, but the unusual separation of houses from one another entailed a wide distribution of the Column that made its protection more difficult.

Two of the Tirnir men with the Column, Jim Moran and John Connolly, had gone home on leave to see their families, as rumour had it that they had been killed. Late on Sunday night they returned to meet Michael Kilroy whom they knew to be then to the north-east of Newport. All three then started off in the darkness for the mountains, hoping to arrive unnoticed at the Column's retreat, before the dawn. It was shortly after three o'clock in the morning when they reached Upper Skerdagh. They had crossed the soft ground before it by the stepping-stones which served instead of a road, and followed up what had been an old bridle path between the mountains. They sat down at the back of MacDonnell's house where the wounded were kept, without making a noise as they did not wish to awaken the people so early in the morning. The next house, Dyra's, opened on to the same yard and there Madden and Kilroy were billeted. In the stillness beneath the dawn sky, the three men were quietly discussing the good line of retreat up by the bed of the stream behind them when, at about four o'clock, they heard rifle shots below, and the crack of rifle fire continued for a while. They did not know that an IRA sentry had started firing on police whom he had observed close to his post. The shots, however, meant immediate danger and the sound roughly

announced the direction. Kilroy sent Jim Moran to Dyra's house to warn him and help Madden to remove the wounded by way of the river bed behind the house. Both Connolly and Moran had been billeted in Lower Skerdagh, and Moran had left his rifle behind there when he set out to visit his people. That lack of a rifle was a great loss now, for Moran, a fine natural shot, was the best marksman in the Column. Kilroy and Connolly started for the lower village, about three quarters of a mile away, and as they hurried down the hollow of the river bed, grey light, undershot by swarthy clouds, was in the sky.

Suddenly Kilroy saw capped figures about a hundred and fifty or two hundred yards away, but on higher ground. They must be police, he thought, as he signalled to Connolly who was in the rear. As an RIC man took aim, Kilroy threw himself to the ground, his rifle beside him, but the shot passed over him. He fired back at once and the two of them got in a few rounds apiece before other dark uniformed figures disappeared from their view. 'Wasn't that a good shot so early in the morning?' he heard an English voice say. Evidently Kilroy's sudden drop out of sight had been reckoned as a casualty by the Tans. Seconds later, the same voice exclaimed with surprise and urgency: 'What was that? It struck the peak of my cap.' A reply came back on the quiet air in a thicker burr of slower English speech. 'Take cover, take cover; you should always take cover in a case like that.'

Meanwhile in the lower village the Column men took up positions on the ground outside the houses in which they were billeted. There was some confusion until groups in the separate houses had made contact with one another, aware now of the immediate menace but unaware of the direction. Tom Kitterick and Paddy O'Connor heard rifle shots above them and, having decided that the upper village was surrounded and under attack, they thought they had best try at once to relieve it. Careful scouting uncovered the positions over which the RIC were spread out, but they were a Janus figure there, protecting themselves from the opposition in Upper Skerdagh and from the fire which had been kept up on them from the lower village. The main body of the Column, which had been billeted in the

lower village, skirted the police positions but could not engage the enemy because the range was too long for the shotgun men and because the riflemen had been issued with high velocity ammunition which was unsuitable for the Martini-Enfields with which most of them were armed.

A group of the Column men, only one of whom had a rifle, suddenly dashed out of the houses in which they had been sleeping and edged away hurriedly from the RIC. They had very nearly been surprised in their beds. Brown of Kilmeena was wounded in the stomach. He ran for a short distance and then fell. He could not be removed without covering fire and there he lay. Tom Kitterick, Cannon, Jack MacDonnell and Johnny Gibbons protected the main body as it made its cautious way towards the upper village. By that time Madden had arranged the moving of the wounded up the valley, but he was now anxious about Kilroy and Connolly. He came further down towards their position but he could not see them. He could hear bullet noises overhead as he went over the hillside above their position. A low artificial mound gave him cover when he lay behind it and tried to search the ground below him for hidden men. This was an elevation on which hawks were inclined to settle as they surveyed the ground for quarry and on such places a trap would be set for them in shooting country. His voice could be heard: 'Michael, where are you, Michael?' But Kilroy could not give away his position by an answering call. Connolly and he were in the open, firing at police movement. After some hours of careful crawling, the two men went backwards uphill, taking aim to protect each other. They were joined by Madden and by Kitterick, Cannon, MacDonnell and Gibbons who had successfully protected their own withdrawal and that of the main body. They were able to guess at the number of police below them, but it was long afterwards when it was found that there were twenty-four of them. The police had come out on foot from Newport before dawn, having left but one of their number behind to hold the barracks. Whether or not they were acting on information was never established by the IRA, but Newport was a town of dubious loyalty to Republicans and the RIC had active friends there.

On the previous Sunday some Column men had gone to a local wake. That focus of random talk and gossip over drink, carrying on the pre-historic tradition of funeral games, where every male from the neighbourhood attended for from three to five hours, may have been the source of leakage. To Column men it would have been a heaven's gift to talk about their wanderings and doings, for though the men kept a close guard on their tongues, a combination of friendly praise, their increased status in the eyes of stay-at-homes and the hospitality of the wake house could loosen talk in a mixture of imagination and reality which would amply satisfy. In addition to this there was the significance which the police might have given the coffin that had been brought out from Newport for the wake. The RIC were on the lookout for wounded who had escaped them at Kilmeena and this news of local death may have been translated by them into the burial of a Column man. It may have been this opinion which brought them out on the hills, although their strength and the fact that they had been making for Upper Skerdagh where the wounded were kept would suggest that they had an important objective and knew where to locate it. In the process of doing so they had got themselves into a tight corner. It was noon and they were pinned to ground from which they could neither advance nor retreat. Already they had sent one of their constables to attempt a break-through for help.

An old tradition handed down locally as 'Brian Roche's prophecy' foretold a fight that would take place in Skerdagh between the Irish and their enemies. It had been often talked about at the firesides in the long winter evenings and it was well known in Skerdagh and to other older people. In the middle of the contest a red-haired man named MacMenamin was to jump on a horse to bring help to the invaders, otherwise they would all be killed. There are people named MacMenamin in nearby glens and it is possible that they came down from the North when the O'Donnells with Gallaghers, Kanes, Dohertys, Sweeneys and other Northerners came into Connacht in the early 17th century, although there seems to be a spoken record that people of that name were already in the glen at that time. The fact is that the constable did break through to get help for the police

trapped at Skerdagh, that he was a red-haired MacMenamin, a native of Donegal, and that he got hold of a horse on which he galloped away in the direction of Newport. Any of the older country people who had seen the red-haired peeler dash across country, crouched bare-back on his mount, might have thought of Brian Roche's prophecy and, as the Skerdagh countryside was both hospitable and friendly to the Column, would have hoped that the rider would fail in his appeal for help.

When the seven Column men who had fought the rearguard action joined forces, Kilroy and Connolly had fired close on a hundred rounds. Ammunition was at once pooled and divided up equally amongst the seven and as there was little standard .303 left, they were faced with the question of whether to use dum-dum ammunition which they had captured from the police in a raid beyond Burrishoole. This problem was debated seriously, as they were short in supply, and what decided them in favour of using it was the memory of the whip-cracking sound made by bullets that had passed over the Column positions at Kilmeena. The bullets which went over them had crackled like the lash of a strong whip and there the men attributed that piercing sound to the use of dum-dum ammunition by the police. Having divided all the ammunition they extended over a considerable distance in order to outflank the RIC. Every now and again the police, who were about five hundred yards away, put up a piece of clothing or a rifle butt to test the vigilance of the men above them. Later, from their position close to a few houses, the IRA observed a line of lorries coming along the road from Newport. These halted near Skerdagh school on the Crossmolina road and military began to move up the slopes.

The IRA rearguard had no choice but to pull out quietly, one by one, without attracting the attention of the police below them. The seven began to climb up by the bridle path to the west of Glenlara. Long before, a small trench had been cut to one side of the path for the purpose of drainage. It had been filled in with earth and was now overgrown with grass of a darker shade of green than that of the growth on either side. Kilroy ordered his men to move over the dark strip as they would be less likely to be observed from below. They crossed to the far side of the stream

where they were given some cake and a can of buttermilk at Chambers' house, but when they emerged with rations they saw police climbing towards the positions they had just vacated, to the west of the small valley.

As they went up the side of Birreenomagh, bursts of machine-gun fire swept the slopes, but in a way which suggested that the police were merely probing the mountainside with the object of flushing the Column out of cover. Police on the Buckoogh side also fired their rifles into likely places of cover, and louder explosions heard at intervals indicated that they were using rifle or hand grenades for the same purpose. The rearguard's line of withdrawal lay through a hollow in the mountainside caused by an extensive landslide. The hollow was overgrown by moss and rushes, and in it the seven men lay down long enough to drink the buttermilk from the can, which one of them threw carelessly to one side when they finished with it. After that they resumed the ascent, all the while watching for events below them. Suddenly they dropped and flattened against the earth. A blue-green RIC man passed up close to the discarded can which glinted on the heather below them, as if it was tapping out warning messages to their enemies. It was the last man in an enemy line, stretched in extended order across from the heights of Buckoogh and moving up the valley. There were moments of intense strain while the IRA men lay still, gripping their weapons, their eyes fixed on every movement by the police. It seemed inevitable that the empty can must be noticed and its significance appreciated, and that two exposed Column men on the flank of the enemy line could not escape observation. The men waited tensely for the excited shouts and warning shots that would mark the discovery of their positions, but to their surprise and relief the police moved on without noticing anything.

The seven continued to climb until they had reached a peak where in places the bog was washed clear away to the underlying gravel below. The surface was bone-dry for there had been no rain for close on a month. Here they had cover and they could remain on guard at ease. It was pleasant to lie close to the heather on a warm May day. A slight wind blew the strength of the sun from their faces. Every now and then a man could have a

peep at the world below or watch the bridle path which went below Mount Eagle on to Shrahmore. They had a telescope which had been taken in a raid on Burrishoole.

The sound of rifle shots came from the distance, deepened by machine-gun bursts as the mountains further back were being searched for the main body of the Column. The military had gone up towards Shrahmore to the west by the side of Lough Feeagh and the police followed round the bridle path leading across to Shrahmore Lodge. An ambulance could be seen near to the school below and the IRA counted what appeared to be bodies carried into it. Enemy casualties were always a subject for rumour. Bodies, according to later accounts, were said to have been brought off to Foxford in lorries, and in another local version there was an export of dead in bacon boxes to England from Ballina. The British admitted a head constable killed and a constable wounded, but the DI, Munroe, was also wounded that day. He had a decent reputation in the Newport area and he was said to have prevented the police from burning houses in Skerdagh once reinforcements had made them so sure of themselves that they felt safe to attack the defenceless villagers.

From their vantage point on the peak, the seven IRA men were able to identify the islands in Clew Bay which gave the impression of being clustered together when seen from such a height. Beyond, on the south side, the Reek pushed up its cone, and echelloned behind were the sharper outlines of the Sheffry mountains and the triple peak of Mullrea further west on that sea edge. Away towards the east the lakes glinted, Beltra nearby, Mask a wide stretch, with the narrow strip of land between it and Lough Cullin at Pontoon. Below them, glistening in the reflected light, as far as they could see, was the whole history of the district. Some of them could supply memoried fragments which in a folklore territory went back to medieval times.

Time there brought past, present and future together. The British would solve a problem as if time were a matter of temporary expediency, but it would be difficult for them to relate the past and present and future in an indivisible unit. The seven talked about the next enemy move and how to circumvent it. Previously they had been anxious to keep outside the triangle

formed by the three towns of Castlebar, Westport and Newport. Now it was felt that this search might be the beginning of a mountain round-up. The British would either place picquets on the ground they had covered this day, surround the area between Lough Feeagh and Ballycroy where there was hardly a house, or move northwards to Nephin Beg and sweep across eastwards towards the isolated brow of Nephin.

It seemed best for the seven to cross the triangle and make for the hills near Aghagower. It was dusk when they came down to Jack MacDonnell's house where now a dead body was lying: the corpse of a pig shot by the RIC. The police had fired on the houses on their way up, before they searched them.

Hungrily the seven IRA ate boiled salmon, drank large mugs of welcome tea. Their hill hosts were glad that their poaching proclivity was appreciated. The neighbours came in to listen to the story of the rearguard and the day-long endurance of the village, that episodic drift of Irish resistance and quiescence. Suddenly in the weavings of these happenings the seven thought of the men farther to the north in the hills, and became silent. When they left the house they carried with them a reserve of salmon in jars, while the dogs in Skerdagh barked an unappreciated accompaniment to their hurried journey towards the Crossmolina road. They were anxious to get as far away as possible from the mountain approaches, and expected the British might already be in position or would be moving up troops under cover of darkness. They crossed the Newport river by a small bridge near Divers. It was midnight before they were on the far side, and in the distance, across Beltra lake, they saw beams of light moving in their direction. That meant the British had begun their round-up, and that the IRA rearguard seven were in danger of being cut off unless they got beyond the Crossmolina road before the lorries came up. As hard as they could leg it they ran towards the road, their rifles hard to control as they jostled and swung. They were fit, hardy men, but after their long and arduous day and the night march that preceded it, that last mile across country tested their endurance as they ran for their lives. They had just crossed the road, taking a wide bog drain in a wild jump, when the enemy lorries came close and

stopped near where they had flattened down behind clamps of turf. Soldiers got down on the road. Officers shone flash lamps on maps or examined them under the headlights of their lorries. They peered at the topography and mispronounced local place-names so that the men behind the ricks of turf found it difficult to hold back laughter. Those voices, difficult to understand through their accents, suddenly enlightened the Column men as to how insoluble both they and their place-names were to these probing foreigners.

One man with no cause for humour was John Madden, lying at the bottom of a drain into which he had fallen through miscalculating his jump. It was a deep drain, and his companions' urge to laughter drew added stimulus from the thought of Madden swearing inwardly as he lay in the muck; they knew that his command of invective was equal to all demands.

Following deliberations amongst British officers, a detail of soldiers was sent to hold the bridge near Divers, over which the IRA had crossed a short time previously, and the convoy then moved slowly forward in the warm May night.

During that day — and while the rearguard held up the advance of Newport constabulary — the remainder of the Column had climbed the mountain path which skirted the steep reaches of Buckoogh. The wounded Swift was put on horseback and held securely by a man astraddle behind him, but Hughes was now able to walk. A message had already been sent on to Skerdagh to John Chambers, a lieutenant of the mountain company, who lived in the first house to the northward beyond Buckoogh, near by the lakes in Derrybrock. 'Green' Chambers, as he was known to distinguish him locally from others of the name, quickly crossed beneath the mountains until at about eight o'clock he met the Column winding up the narrow valley. None of the men knew the mountains and to him they were too slow moving, for there was possible danger ahead of them. But he was a hillman whose leg muscles had been made limber by hill heights, and the mountains instead of being obstacles were an easy security.

Moane had hoped to bring the wounded to the caves

underneath the cliff edges of Curreen which stretches its narrow spine below Nephin Beg to the west of the Altaconey river. There he felt they could best lie in safety as the few houses in the hills would most certainly be searched by British troops. Chambers, however, knew that British reinforcements could pass up by road alongside Lough Feeagh to Shramore and cut them off before the Column could reach the hills to the north. He suggested that they cross quickly by the ridge between Mount Eagle and Bireencorragh, toward Leamadartaun to the north-east. When they were beyond the ridge they could rest and then decide about their further climbing.

Troops from Castlebar or from Ballina could bring their transport into the hills as far as Bunaveela which lay further to the east. To avoid encirclement from that direction, the Column men would have to move northwards some distance. Before they reached Leam, as it was locally called, an aeroplane engine was heard in the distance. The men lay close to the slit of a black dyke in the lighter rise of bog. The chestnut pony was freed so as not to attract attention and he kicked up his heels in delight as he raced away over the dry bog surface. When the aeroplane, which circled round a few times, had moved slowly westward, the men spread out. Swift was now carried in turns across a man's back until Leam was reached. There, the thirsty men drank tea, while a scout was sent up to a height from where he could watch the surrounding valleys. He heard rifle shots in the distance towards Shramore Lodge but could not discover any advance of khaki or the bottle-green RIC.

Swift was put astride another pony and the Column moved on among low rises until they halted on the steep hillside which ran down into Bunaveela Lake. They lay deep in the comforting heather while waiting for further news of a round-up. Messengers soon came up from Shrahmore Lodge with the latest information. The RIC had been in 'Green' Chamber's house beside the small lake. They had demanded food, then they had gone on to the Lodge. Through their field glasses the police had seen a straggled line of Column men cross a ridge over two miles away, but by now RIC legs were traitors to RIC desires. They were too tired by their wanderings in the hills to walk any

further and despite the efforts made by their district inspectors and by other officers to persuade them to follow over the hills, they sat down at their ease. An officer said they would advance in the early morning, if not at midnight, and as soon as they had rested in Newport they would go up by Shramore towards Glendavoolagh.

The depleted Column remained on the hillside until seven in the evening. They could now climb into the mountains which loomed away in a series of bastioned cliff edges, or to the north-west towards Bangor Erris, or they could wind their way among lakes scattered like currants in a cake to the north-east. Most of the Column intended to remain close to Letterdesh beside the lake until they would be informed by mountain men of the approach of British troops guided by constabulary. Their scout would be 'Lame Willie' Chambers, who knew the hills from searching winter drifts for hidden flocks, or by following up the tedious wanderings of almond-eyed mountainy sheep. That intimate knowledge could serve him even in a dark night.

Castlebar men, however, were anxious to bring the wounded back to their own battalion which would likely be outside of any convergence of troops. By nine o'clock they had set off by the lake side, guided by 'Green' Chambers, who was to bring them across the slopes of Bullaunmore towards the roadway from the east which ended at Glendavoolagh Lodge. Close to Keenagh the wounded were given women's clothing from a small village of Hegarty's. The slimmest boy was dressed as a young girl, while the most elderly became an old lady with a dancing bonnet of spangles. If they were halted they were to be a wedding party on their way towards Glenisland, a safe retreat for the Castlebar Column. Their driver had been an RIC man up to a few months ago before resigning. When they came close to Boghadoon, scouts told them that already soldiers of the Border Regiment from Castlebar had held up a crossroads to the south on the way to Glenisland and the road to it was now unsafe. Hurriedly the driver turned to the east under the long shadow of Nephin. 'Green' Chambers then left them. He was anxious about the men who were behind him, near Bunaveela. When he came to the village beyond the lake side at Letterdesh he was told that

the Column had gone away to the west, intending to get across to the valley of Glendahurk. Chambers made his way in the darkness through the hills to Derrybrock, but as he was close to his own house he heard voices, English voices, and he threw himself down quickly in the grass. He saw dim figures pass below him with rifles slung on their shoulders. When he came to his house he was told that English soldiers had been there, unsure of their direction, and they were on their way to Keenagh.

Meanwhile the Westport Column had heard about the Kilmeena fight from one of their men who had been present and who had subsequently made his way to them across country. That same night two men who had been at work in England, Willie Malone and Joe Walsh, came home to join the Column. They got off the train at Islandeady station and were brought to the Column during the night. The night following the encounter at Skerdagh, word reached this Column that the wounded IRA men in Westport were to be brought away under guard by train next day. In the morning, at Cushin, the train was held up while the Westport Column waited near the railway line to make a rescue bid; but neither escort nor wounded were aboard. In order to have something to show for the morning's work, however, mails were taken off the train and censored. It was hoped, too, that this operation, showing that a column was busy in another direction, would cause the British to withdraw troops from the mountain round-up which was endangering Kilroy and his men. This round-up with its staff basis of map planning was just another of a series of operations carried out through many counties during the dry weather which held from the end of April onwards. A rapidly increasing strength of khaki and police searched hills and mountains, treating all whom they met with as hostile. All men between seventeen and seventy were moved back under a strong guard to an isolated farmhouse or to schoolrooms. There they were sharply questioned by intelligence officers, while one of the big moustaches from the RIC peered through a curtained slit in a window at successive batches of prisoners, using his memoried eye. British regular officers and RIC inspectors, irritated at the conscious stupidity

(and lack of understanding) of some of the men they questioned, often used their fists and revolver handles, or handed their sources of upset over to the ready rifle butts and boots of their subordinates. People, though frightened by the theatrical grimness of the inquisition, were determined to guard what little information they had. Most of the detained men were freed at nightfall, but any suspects were sent on to the nearest barracks for a further scrutiny and a variation of the methods for extracting information.

In this round-up of Nephin and its neighbourhood no IRA man was captured and the Column, so far as the British were concerned, had vanished into the mountain mists. The British reports referred to large rebel concentrations in the tree-bare mountains. A conception of the rival nations which holds good for propaganda and general purposes seemed to have been reversed. The heightened imagination of British reports as forwarded to their gullible superiors, when compared with the Irish version to their General Headquarters of this simple, but effective, rearguard action is curious. The Irish report is conservative and factual, but British Headquarters again inflated their own field version of concentrations of cornered rebels to an enlarged distortion. Evidently whatever large movement the British undertook had to be justified in result from minor to major ranks until at length it could be triumphantly read by the British Cabinet in London. What a pleasure it would be to have overheard how place-names known as wandering ground to wild geese, duck and the slim fox were now so emphasized.

Less than a week after Skerdagh, the Brigade Column was billeted in the straggly village of Clady to the south-east of the road from Westport to Leenane, under the sharp shoulders of the Partry mountains. To the south of the scattered houses on the ridge, bogland stretched in a level breadth to the main road. Further west the sharp crests of the Sheffry hills mount towards Doolough Pass which is backed by the steep sides of Mweelrea. An odd grove of stunted trees broke the tawny-green land surface where there was shelter, but higher there was nothing

but smooth mountain curves to lead the eye from one shapely form to another. Strong sunshine and a mass succession of moving cloud sharpened and shaded out-thrust and valley, until every projection and recession had been softly sculptured with light and shade and coloured subtly. To the north a few isolated hills lay in the distance below the sharp flanks of Croagh Patrick on whose southern side the pilgrims' road swung in a sudden white curve as it led upwards. The landscape in colour and bog, hill and mountain, was a crystallisation of western scenery and economic difficulty. As well, it was a symbol of the Column's historic background and an indication of their roots.

The recent rearguard action had heightened the spirit of the Column which now comprised a strong Westport section, with men from the Newport battalion and from Louisburg. The previous night some of the men had burned the empty RIC barracks at Drummin below the Reeks. It had recently been evacuated following a brush between a patrol and some of the Column. The men had carefully examined the barracks before they entered it as it had been discovered that the police were leaving booby-trap mines behind them in deserted posts. One of the Column men found a hand grenade attached to the inside of the front door so that it would explode when the door was opened. The grenade was disconnected and examined. It helped to increase the Brigade armament. The grenades carried by the Column were of steel piping cut to section grooves, but they were not as effective as other models from Dublin factories based on the Mills pattern.

On the evening of June 3rd a scout brought in word to Clady that two lorries and a motor car of RIC had halted some distance down the Leenane road where a filled-in trench had been opened afresh by the local Volunteers. He reported that men who had been working in the nearby bogs were rounded up by police and compelled, under the menace of fixed bayonets and a careless handling of revolvers, to empty their cartloads of turf into the gap. While the fuel was filling up the trench, police jibed at the unwilling workers and boasted about their victory at Kilmeena.

The end house of Clady was close on a mile and a half from the main road, so before the Column was mobilised time had ticked away and the police had moved on. Kilroy knew that they would probably have to return by the same road, for the bridge at Delphin, which ordinarily would allow a car to pass through to Louisburg, had been destroyed. That gap would also prevent the RIC from turning at Doolough up the rutty road which ran through Glennumera by the Red Gap back to the Westport road, some three miles beyond to the east. Kilroy instructed Brodie Malone, Vice-Commandant of the Westport battalion, to put his men in temporary positions with sections placed at such distances as would allow them to deal individually with the three enemy vehicles which he expected would be well spaced out on the return journey. Tom Kitterick, the Brigade's inimitable Quartermaster, who could be expected to borrow a sword from the Archangel Gabriel and then question its return, was with the group to take on the second lorry. Kilroy, Madden and Joe Ring went down the Westport road to inspect another more suitable site, beyond a curve some six hundred yards away.

Malone placed his first section on a rise of ground about a hundred and fifty yards from the road. There was a flat stretch behind for a short distance. In front there was a wall of boulders running from knee to breast height. Beyond, towards Leenane, was scrub and a stone wall, under cover of which communications could be maintained with the second section about a hundred and fifty yards away. Some fifty yards below Malone's men was a cottage, its gable facing the road. There were a few outhouses alongside it, and a narrow passageway shut off on either side by loose stone walls wound upwards from the roadside.

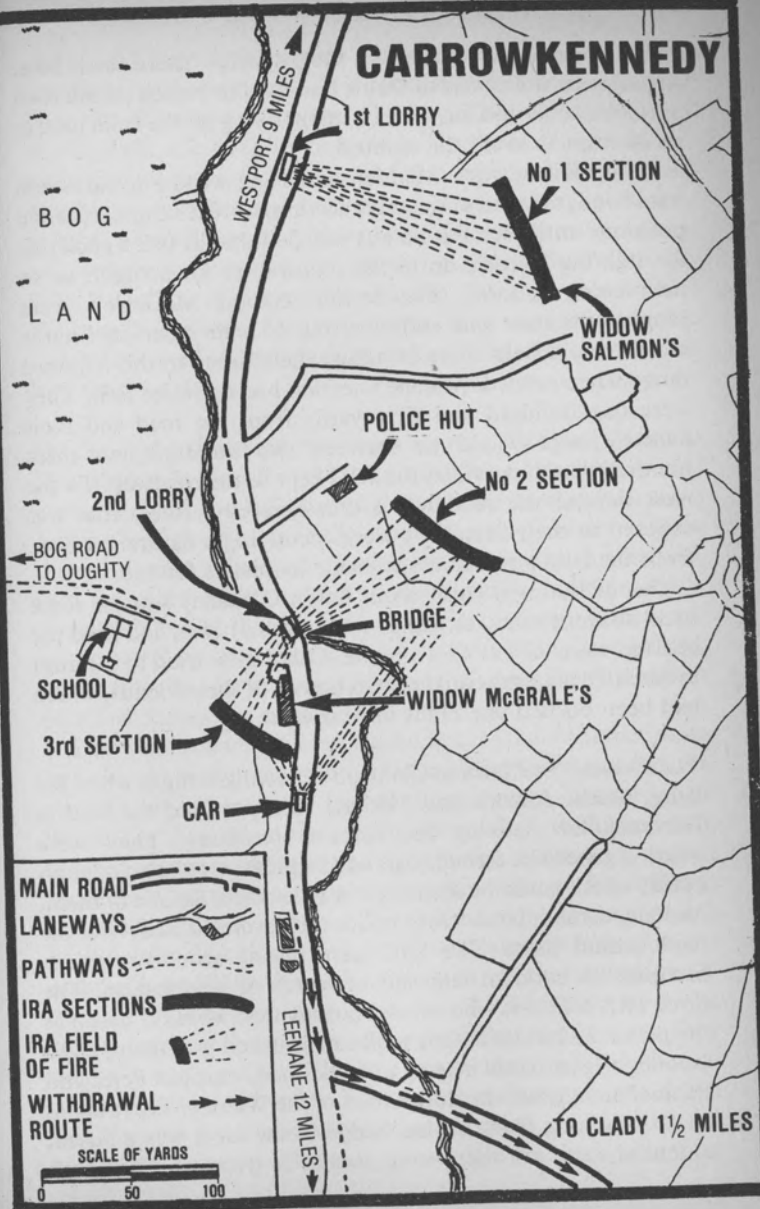
The second position was on the site of an old police hut which Johnny Duffy, captain of Aghagower company, had burned down in the Easter of 1920. Paddy Duffy, his young brother, was now making a loophole up in the first position. He was a good shot and he sighted his rifle on the topmost edges of wall and bank along the roadside. The police hut had been built during the Land War to keep the Widow Salmon, whose house was on this small holding of land, in order. She still lived in her

house about fifty yards behind the site. She had fought hard to avoid eviction, and was known locally as 'William O'Brien's widow', for O'Brien, who was then living in Mallow Cottage beyond Westport, had looked after her interests and had provided for her, admiring her staunch fighting qualities, but which, with the vehemence of land bitterness, had nearly driven her crazy. Peter Skahill had grabbed her small holding but he did not get any ease of life along with it. The only occasion the widow turned 'grabber' herself was when she caught a grip of Skahill by the whiskers in the chapel at Cushlough and the priest had all he could do to part the two of them.

Tom Kitterick and Ned Moane spoke of the widow as they explored their position. Between them and the first position was a rise of ground which contained scattered boulders, scrub and a grove of young oak trees. A passage that served as a laneway led down to the main road, but it was more like the rough, dried-up bed of a mountain torrent. A stone wall on its flank gave cover for moving men if they went cautiously. Kitterick and Moane had a view of the Leenane road for a short distance beyond the cottage of the Widow Salmon, but that road then swung abruptly in a curve. They could deal with the second lorry provided it came about two hundred yards or more behind the first one. The success of the action would depend upon the distances between the three vehicles when fire was first opened. If the motor car was in the lead, the patrol might extend over four to five hundred yards of the road, in which case the two rear sections would have to engage the two lorries at the outset. The other section which held the most secure and best position would be confronted only with a Ford car, though in that event the car could be quickly accounted for and the men could then link up with the nearest section.

On the slope of a hill about one hundred feet high to the rear of the McGrath cottage, and almost at right angles to the main road, were the ten men of the third section. This position had a few good banks which screened it from the road and a small grove of trees permitted movement. The men had a good view of the Westport road for about eight hundred yards. They could fire down at any vehicle which might suddenly turn into the

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raised bog road leading to Oughty, for there had been insufficient time even to throw boulders or stones on the road surface to slow up a lorry which might swing off the main road in an attempt to avoid the ambush.

While Kilroy with Madden and Ring walked towards the road bend, the men of the three sections were testing alternative positions until each felt he was satisfied that he had a good one for sighting his rifle on to the roadway or his shotgun on to intervening ground. The section behind McGrale's were judging distance and endeavouring to remember landmarks which would help them to adjust their sights to the required range when needed. Malone's section had an easier task. They were one hundred and fifty yards from the road and their longest range would be between two hundred and three hundred yards, provided the RIC kept to the roadway. To the west beyond the road was a dun-covered softness that was exposed to their fire. They were occupying a natural bastion. Even the boulders had ready-made loopholes for use.

One of the men pointed out Owen O'Malley's house some little distance away, or rather what was left of it, and then the charred ruins of Pat Cox's home. Other men tried to pick out towards Drummin a further two houses of their friends, which had been burned one night in March.

The Column had been in Clady on a moonlight night when Joe Ring, Brodie Malone and Michael Kilroy walked the road to Derrynakillew looking for ambush positions. They were wearing gaberdine trench coats and leggings, regulation column outfit, which could be identified at a distance. As one of them, Malone, turned, he saw four police on bicycles at a curve of the road behind them. The RIC were nosing around as usual, listening for random talk and in search of information. The three IRA officers, who carried automatics, wheeled round as the police dismounted. One policeman rushed past them, and a moonlight gun battle began, with the sharp crack of Peter and Parabellum against the duller thud of the Webley. There could be no 'shooting from behind hedges' now for it was a raised, unfenced road, but there were ditches in which the RIC took

shelter. All four of them were wounded, one fatally, and four revolvers were captured. This sudden patrol encounter had been the first success of the Column. Two nights later, on March 24th, the RIC broke loose in Westport. They held the town for five hours from midnight, during which they burned one house, wrecked the contents of shops, then used heavy bombs on buildings and removed furniture to the middle of the street where it was set on fire. They threatened Tom Kitterick's parents with revolvers and burned their furniture; then bullied the women in Brodie Malone's house. They were very specific about what would happen to Kitterick and Malone when they fell into their hands.

On the night following the bombing of a Westport patrol at Red Bridge, a Tan District Inspector from Newport, with a crowd of Tans and RIC roared through the streets of the town looking for fight. Fudge, the District Inspector, had developed a distorted sense of humour which hunted men in their shirts out into the night cold, or made them sit astride bullocks which were then lashed to a buckjumping frenzy. Another joke, unappreciated by the women, was to spread their hens' tribute on the floor and force men and boys of the household to walk in bare feet across the eggs.

The Tans harnessed Ned Horan and Malone's father to an outside car and some whipped the elderly men around the streets while others sat at ease on the side seats. They fed their 'horses' as they called them with raw salt ling, and when they reached Horan's shop they poured down his throat, through a tundish, a gargantuan quantity of his own porter. Malone managed to escape while the Tans halted to pull other men out of their beds, but Horan paid for the missing man through kicks and the heavy thuds of revolver butts. When they came again to Malone's house, they threatened to shoot his daughter when she told them she did not know where her father had gone to. They added a man called O'Reilly, whom they had first beaten crooked, to the car harness. He was also made to paint red, white and blue the fountain on the fair green which had been erected to Doctor Johnson. Men whom they laid hands on later they

painted with green, white and orange to show how impartially they were guided by unpaid-for drink.

Then the RIC and Tans, having exhausted the possibilities for such entertainment in the town, wandered into the country. In the kitchen of Owen O'Malley's house they found a sick cow that had been brought in for treatment. Creegan, the Westport sergeant, poured a tin of petrol over the sick animal and sacrificed it in a ceremonial flame that also consumed the house. Owey, son of the house, whose misfortune it was to have been at home when the visitation took place, had his jaw broken by the Tans who, with their RIC comrades, danced about the flames like a war party of Red Indians. In between their extravagant humours they beat people with rifle-butts and kicked them with studded boots. Sergeant Hallinan and a Tan named French particularly distinguished themselves that night and on other occasions. By this time the Tans had been well instructed by the regular RIC on what families were to be manhandled and what houses were to suffer wanton destruction in raids.

This destruction in Westport was the first unofficial reprisal in Ireland for which the British in their House of Commons had made themselves responsible. In reply to a question in the House, Denis Henry, the Attorney-General, stated:

The house of one person and the contents of the houses of certain other persons were systematically destroyed by members of the Crown forces, acting under orders from their superior officer. The persons whose property was destroyed were known to the police to be actually engaged in the rebel conspiracy.

The decision to destroy the property was taken by the responsible police officer on the spot, acting on his own discretion. I am satisfied that the officer concerned acted according to the best of his judgement, believing that immediate action of a drastic character was called for if future outrages were to be averted.

Lord Robert Cecil asked if it were left entirely to the discretion of the local officer, necessarily not of very high rank, whether this destruction was carried out or not. In reply, Mr. Henry said: 'There are occasions when it is necessary to act rapidly and it must be left to the officer in charge.'

This strange answer came after six months of continuous questioning in the Commons as members tried to make government representatives state that their troops or police had been responsible for reprisals.

Indeed, both Brodie Malone and Tom Kitterick, as they awaited the return of the police on that June evening in 1921, had letters from home in their pockets, telling them of recent armed threats, made by Hallinan, French and others, to their women-folk during frequent and aimless raids on their houses.

Now, for the threads of those nights' work to be woven to a proper satisfaction, there came a shout from the nearest section: 'They're coming! They've just left Darby's! Get ready!' Darby Hastings' pub, which had suffered on the night of the constabulary burnings, was a little over a mile down the road, so the patrol should be inside the ambush position in a few minutes. The men were excited and tense as they sighted their rifles and kept close to the cover of their boulders.

The usual formation of a light patrol consisted of two tenders or lorries and a motor car. The lighter vehicle was often used as a scout on narrow roads and it could be sent some distance ahead to carefully observe the road in front and the surrounding countryside. When the road surface was blocked by a trench, loose stones or fallen trees, the light car could be manhandled past these obstacles. In case of attack, the car might be sent for assistance.

A short time before the patrol was signalled, an old man below the bastion had been using a spade along a potato ridge. Suddenly he saw above him seven men who were shifting stones to improvise loopholes. He saw them, as he thought, poking at stones, and he swelled with rage at the thought of another onslaught on his walls by playboys looking for rabbits. 'Get to the devil out of here,' he shouted, as he waved his spade in anger. 'You did enough damage last Sunday, you and your rabbiting.' Malone, anxious for the old man's safety as he heard the lorries burring on their way, attempted to placate him. But he continued: 'Making bruss of my fine walls. Go on away out of that.' As he straddled a wall to get closer to them, the wall

collapsed under him. At this moment the signal came from the second section and the men laughed at the old man's confusion as they settled down with their weapons.

Rifle fire was opened on the leading lorry which wavered and then halted close to the bank, a little beyond the passageway leading down to the cottage below the IRA position. Police tumbled out quickly and got down behind the bank which gave them some cover but not protection. Two did not move. One was a District Inspector named Stevenson. The patrol convoy had gone as far as the bridge at Glenacullew which was partly demolished, and had then turned back. At Darby Hastings' pub Stevenson had taken the wheel from the driver. When opposite the laneway, he turned his head as if he had noticed something and at that moment he received a bullet through the forehead. The other driver was also killed instantly.

'They're throwing out the machine-gun', Tom Heavey shouted, and a metal object landed on the road out of sight of the section. The muzzle was swung towards the third section on the west of the road which had this lorry and the lorry behind it under their sights. A short burst of fire came from the Lewis gun, then another, and then the gunner lay dead beside his gun.

Paddy Duffy, Johnny, his brother, and Kane, who were all good shots, were watching from above for any movement near the gun. Kane was a natural shot, as was Jim Moran who was close to the burnt-out police hut. It was said of Moran that he could cut a telegraph wire at a distance with his Mauser rifle. Kilroy had insisted that his Column men should practise with the disc, which had improved their use of sights, and they had had ample trigger practise as well. That training had produced good results, but no rifle would give prolonged service without an armourer's adjustment. Too well men knew that the best rifle was a recently captured rifle.

A second gunner fired a burst of eight or nine shots from the Lewis in the direction of the third section; then he swung the muzzle in the air to protect himself from the riflemen above, but enough of his body was still showing and he, too, fell dead beneath the gun.

Rifles were projected over the sides of the first lorry and an

occasional shot was fired, but the second section, who could observe but little of this action, could see a pair of legs exposed near the open tail of the lorry and some of them fired the odd shot in that direction.

The second lorry had rounded the bend beyond the bridge and passed the road to Oughty which led through Derrynakillew. It was stopped by rifle fire from both sides of the road as soon as the reports of shots were heard from the direction of the first tender. This lorry had been commandeered that morning in Westport and it was driven by a civilian. The RIC in it made for rough cover above the road and by degrees they got as far as the stream bridge, under which some of them sheltered. The driver lay down behind a lorry wheel and flattened himself down on the roadside. After a while the constabulary ran towards McGrales' thatched cottage facing on to the road. Here they prepared the house for resistance until reinforcements could reach them. They poked rifles out through the windows in front and through a window high up in the gable which controlled a view down the Westport road. After making continuous noise with their rifles, as if the din was a solution for their difficulty, they found they had been too lavish in their attack on the threatening scenery. Their spare supply of ammunition had been left behind in the lorry. They endeavoured to make the Widow McGrale go out to the lorry and, when she refused them, they tried to induce her young son to venture out. He would not be fired on, either going out or coming back, they assured him, for certainly the men outside would not injure him.

'Go out and get it yourself,' the Widow said, 'and leave the boy alone; it's your ammunition.' Her shouts of 'Give it to them! Fire away, lads!' could be heard up the hillside, her words addressed to the IRA in defiance of her unwanted visitors.

The motor car was some distance behind the second lorry and it halted beyond the cottage. Three police jumped off the exposed side and two remained on the sheltered edge of the road which had a thicket beside it close to the cottage. Out on the extreme flank of the ambush sections was Jimmy Flaherty who, as he had been billeted in the farthest house, was the last man to reach the position. He had served nine years in the 1st battalion

of the Connaught Rangers. Now as he waited until the RIC would come closer, only one of them continued to advance; the other two retreated to the far side of the road. These two were under Flaherty's rifle but he did not fire. The other man had disappeared into the broken ground which was sprinkled with outcrops of rock, hollows and small clumps of thorn bushes.

Flaherty knew the man was advancing by the shouts he heard. 'Come on, the Shinnars are retreating, come on.' Then after an interval his animus was directed to his comrades. 'Come on, you efferers! The rebels are beaten.' Suddenly he reappeared as he crossed a wall over a hundred yards away. Flaherty fired but the policeman suddenly vanished again. Perhaps he was trying to move up further towards the noise of the firing coming from the first tender, the ex-Ranger thought. Then he saw him once more, about seventy yards away, and he fired again. After a long pause he saw a policeman moving slowly up on to the road and by his movements he knew that he was badly wounded. Then he saw the blue-green uniform suddenly fall near to the bridge.

It was now two hours since the first shot was fired. Batty Coyne had been steadily shooting at what he said was a policeman's head beside the lorry wheel, but when a few others had a careful look they found he was shooting at the sun-god. The sunlight was reflected from off the wheel-hub and this shimmering circle he had mistaken for a face.

Michael Kilroy was worried as he watched the progress of the fight. Unless the surrender of the first lorry was forced quickly, the Column might not have time to concentrate on the police in the McGrath cottage. Enemy reinforcements could arrive at any moment from Castlebar, Westport and Ballinrobe, either by road or over the hills on their eastern flank. As he went towards the redoubt he met Joe Baker who had a few men with him, and he talked over his difficulties. Baker with his men would move down the stony concealed passageway to the south, while a few others would work their way round to the north of the police to bomb the lorry. The police had been firing grenades from the lorry for some time. These exploded ten or fifteen yards below the stony wall of the redoubt and made a great deal of noise, but the men above were secure from the flying splinters. During a

lull in the grenade throwing, fire was observed coming from a hill about four hundred and fifty yards away. It was quickly silenced by a few shots. Afterwards it was found that it was Joe Ring who had been firing on the lorry from that point. He had moved well out to one flank to get a better target.

Kilroy now spoke to Malone and arranged that a fresh assault on the lorry would be made by Johnny Duffy, his brother Paddy, and by Kane. Paddy was the youngest lad in the Column, only seventeen years of age, but in his determination he had plagued his officers until he was allowed to join the Westport section. Johnny had a bayonet which he could fix on the rifle boss, as had Tommy Heavey who was close to Baker's group and was a little older than Paddy. The bayonets were to be used for the final charge. Their principle use up to this attack was for cutting up Bendigo and cut plug tobacco, for which purpose they were admirably suited. The three were given grenades to throw when they got close to the lorry. As they began to move down behind stone walls, Johnny Duffy was held up by rifle fire and he signalled to the other two behind him to move further on to his flank.

Down a water-rutted lane to the south, Joe Baker, Jack Mac Donnell and Tommy Heavey pushed on toward the road. Heavey used his rifle from the left shoulder so as to expose his body less to the police fire from the gable of the Widow McGrath's house. As they advanced, a rifle grenade that was being hurled by one of the police fell back into the lorry and exploded. It never became known whether the man with the missile was first hit by a bullet or not; the explosion killed him instantly and fatally wounded other police beside him. At once a handkerchief was hoisted on top of a rifle as a token of surrender. The taking of a surrender was always a dubious procedure. The RIC had been notified from their headquarters that they should at all times carry a revolver inside their tunics. After a tentative series of halts, Column men advanced to the lorry.

Only one of the police was unwounded. He had dug himself into the bank beside the road and had not fired any cartridges from his rifle magazine nor had he used the ammunition from

his sling. Leaning against a wall, as though resting, was an elderly sergeant who was to have retired on pension next day. He was dead and fell on his face when touched. He had been compelled to go on patrol by the Tans in the party. Sergeant Creegan, who had been wounded in the lorry, was again severely injured when the grenade exploded. Splinters from his rifle butt were driven into his stomach and groin.

When Malone came down the rough ground by the Salmon house he saw the front door was open and he wondered what had happened to the Widow, as intermingled fire from rifles, Lewis gun and rifle grenades had crossed the roof and sides of her house during the action. Inside, settled at the turf fire, was the Widow Salmon. She blew a good puff of smoke from her pipe as she turned her head. 'Did ye kill all the black bastards?' she asked. A door borrowed from her house was carried down to be used as a stretcher for the badly-wounded Creegan. When the wounded Sergeant was lifted on to it, he saw Tom Kitterick near him. 'Is this what you did to me, Tommy?' he asked, 'after I saved you that day I saw you in the workhouse?'

Some time previously the Westport workhouse had been raided and Kitterick and Tom Gavin were inside, in the hospital. They had managed to get out of the building, but evidently some of the raiders had seen them.

When Creegan and another constable were carried up to the cottage, the Widow Salmon at first refused to allow them to be brought inside her door. She was, perhaps, remembering the bitter land war and the resistance displayed on the land beside her home. 'No peeler will darken my door', she said stubbornly, but relented after some persuasion and prepared a drink for the two wounded who remained outside in the open under the warm sun. She sent a pillow for Creegan and a rug to keep him warm. The Column men helped to bandage the wounded and as they lighted cigarettes a spate of talk soon relieved the tension of the uneasy constabulary. Suddenly Heavy and Ring, who had come back across the bog, noticed that the second policeman, Cullen, was tearing up a piece of paper. When questioned, he asserted that the paper was a private letter, but when it was examined it was found to contain a list of Westport men who might have been concerned in the ambush at Kilmeena.

Column men clustered around the lorry, examining the armoured plates with interest. This protection, they thought, was better for their opponents than if they had been 'firing from behind hedges'. Yet the hedge had proved to be stronger than the steel which at near distance did not effectively resist rifle bullets. Kilroy, who had an experimental mind where material was concerned, fired a few bullets into the steel to satisfy himself about resistance or otherwise. The men handled captured rifles with as much care as if they had been gold ornaments from the National Museum. The Lewis gun was approached with hushed voices. Here was a source of power which had given strength to the enemy and was now to be their concentrated protection, even if only on occasions when ammunition could be afforded.

The other wounded police were carried up from the roadside. 'You chaps weren't at Kilmeena', said a Tan, 'for here you couldn't stick up a bloody finger but it would be shot off.'

John Madden brought the Lewis gun to Flaherty who had been a number one gunner in France. It was a good gun, he found, and was in perfect order. He examined some of the drums, then moved the Lewis into a covered position closer to the McGrale cottage. The unwounded constable from the tender was sent under a flag of truce to the cottage, but the RIC refused to come out and kept the police constable inside. He had been told to tell them that if any of the people in the house were injured as a result of the subsequent attack, they would be held responsible and they would pay dearly for it. The RIC were also told that if they refused to surrender the prisoners held outside might be shot. They were asked to allow the woman and her children to come out under a white flag, but there was no answer to this request.

Kilroy was talking to Madden about the problem of the McGrale house, saying he would have to move up more men under cover until they got above it on the hill, when the conversation was suddenly interrupted. Flaherty sprayed a few bursts of bullets across and back the thatched roof until the dried thatch flaked off as if it was being thudded by MacBirna's flail. Then he rattled bullets on the small windows until the glass disintegrated and the door was made a sieve. There came an excited cheer from the Column men when they realised that the

enemy's main strength, the Lewis which had supported the police at Kilmeena, was now being used against them. A rifle with a dish cloth attached was slung out a window.

The police were slow to make up their minds. 'Come on out, quick' was shouted to them. There was a long silence. The RIC were uneasy about facing the men outside, and their recent histories stirred at the bottom of uneasy stomachs. 'Are you going to come out?' Then they walked out with their hands above their heads.

The Widow had a great welcome for her rescuers who came inside to gather up the police rifles. She made little of the damage done to her house. 'Oh, the door will do,' she said to some of the men who were examining the many holes in it. 'Sure, it'll make the kitchen fine and airy.'

The constabulary were not at all sure of themselves, it could be seen. Some must have felt their records put them beyond the pale of mercy, and the Tans probably expected to be shot, since there had been an order in the autumn of 1920 from General Headquarters to shoot Tans on sight. Brodie Malone went up to Sergeant Hallinan who stood uneasy by the roadside.

'I have you now, Hallinan,' said Malone.

'I know you have, Brodie,' replied the Sergeant. 'I know that well.'

When they were prisoners, with death as an expected corollary, some of the Royal Irish were anxious to show their desire to please, and eager to make use of the softening effect of the Christian name which in the easy intimacy of the West brought people closer.

Kitterick came running down the road and Hallinan saw the 'Peter' in his hand. 'Can I have a priest, Tommy,' he asked in uncertain voice.

'I'll priest you', said Kitterick determinedly, coming closer, as if he was ready to give the coup de grace to a salmon. Then he and Malone laughed. Their laughter, provoked by the Sergeant's fright, now eased his fear and he felt more hopeful.

A short time previously Malone had said to Kilroy: 'I suppose we'll shoot them, Michael,' as if he had expected an order. There was a pause. Then Kilroy spoke in his slow serious way.

'No, Brodie, we can't do it; our nature is not hard enough.'

The police stood to attention on the roadside. Then Kilroy noticed that blood from a Tan's boot was raddling the dry dust. 'Why didn't you tell me he was wounded,' he asked the head constable. The wounded Tan sat down and was shortly joined by his companions. Cigarettes were shared by the Column men who chatted with their prisoners. The police became reassured almost against their will, although they had already been told as they paraded that nothing would happen to them.

French, a notoriously aggressive Tan, was lying on the roadside near the bridge, but when he was moved he moaned. A man dipped his handkerchief into a stream so as to squeeze the water into the wounded man's mouth, but the Tan turned his head aside. 'I never took a drink from an Irishman in my life,' he said.

French it was who had faced up the rough ground to outflank the position, thinking that the Kilmeena weakness was being repeated. Now, when his pockets were searched by the roadside, a letter was found from his wife in England who had been anxious about him. She had dreamt that he was in trouble, rifles were lying around, and she saw him lying dead. The letter ended: 'So look after yourself, John.'

There was now respect for the cross-grained man who had spent his short bitterness in Westport, for in trying to help the other police he had met with that inexorable enemy, death. He had carried a pet jackdaw around the town with him, and when he dozed off in a pub the bird would peck at him. Whenever a stranger entered the bar where he was drinking with friendly civilians, the jackdaw gave him warning taps.

By this time rifles, revolvers, ammunition, boxes of grenades and machine-gun drums were piled together. The Column men now had good service rifles to carry with them and as they loaded themselves the weight increased. They had twenty-two extra rifles to bring with them, eight drums for the Lewis gun, several boxes of grenades, twenty-one revolvers and about six thousand rounds of rifle ammunition. The Lewis gun had been christened 'Mrs. Murphy' and the loaded ammunition drums became her 'wardrobe' which bore heavily on her retinue. This

extra weight when distributed among the twenty-four column officers and men, twenty-one of whom were from the Westport battalion, made them a less limber fighting force. If they happened to meet British reinforcements in strength each man, except the machine-gun crew of two, would have two rifles to use in action. In case of retirement, if outpressed, their difficulties would be serious by reason of the excess of their virtues in armament. A small revolver which DI Stevenson had carried had an inscription on the gold-mounted handle. It was given by Sir Edward Carson to the DI's father when the elder Stevenson had been Head Constable of Glasgow. DI Stevenson had served in Erris, but immediately after Kilmeena he was transferred as an additional officer to Westport to keep the police more aware of danger.

Petrol was shaken from tins over the two lorries and the car. Flames spurted and roared; further petrol added to the furious blaze. A Tan named Upton suddenly doffed his tunic. 'That's the fifth rifle I've surrendered since I came to this bloody country,' he said, 'and I've enough of it now. So here goes.' He hurled the uniform tunic into the blazing lorry. 'Now I've finished with them, those RIC bastards,' he added.

Then Kilroy spoke to the police. He warned them that reprisals on houses would mean that RIC houses would be burnt first and that others would follow. If there was any shooting of IRA or civilians as a result of this encounter, the captured police would be held responsible, and if IRA wounded were not respected in future it would be hard on any further police captured. Some of the Column had abused the villagers within constabulary hearing, knowing well that the information, when passed on, would help their friends. A policeman had been released to carry information to Westport about the wounded men, who had been attended by John Madden, but who now needed a doctor and a priest. The constable was given a bicycle but when he tried to ride it he fell off when he had gone a few yards. The excitement had been too much for his straight guidance. Column men straightened out the damaged rim into shape and he mounted more surely the second time. When he came to the barracks in Westport the barracks orderly, O'Brien,

would not allow him in, but when he shouted 'They're all killed and captured at Carrowkennedy', the door was opened and the messenger fell in on top of him. O'Brien, who was an elderly man, had been ordered out that morning on patrol, but an English Tan said, 'You're too old. I'll go instead of you for I want to get a crack at these damn Shinners.' That Tan who had relieved him was killed in the second lorry. Six police were killed and four wounded, of whom two were to die during the night.

The belligerent RIC garrison of Westport kept indoors that evening as soon as the firing was heard in the faint distance and they remained in until morning. The military from Castlebar, warned of Column movement from Westport, branched off the main Westport road towards Aghagower but they must have felt their way cautiously or have waited until daylight to move on a little further. Reinforcements which came on through Westport were careful. A priest was sent ahead and behind him troops and constabulary were closely interested in certain aspects of scenery. The captured Lewis gun, which had been made such good use of by a Column man the previous evening, was now a concentrated threat to the convoy. Their slow approach paid tribute to the expected use of the weapon.

The Column marched off jauntily along the bohereen to Clady. They told the people on the way not to mention the direction in which they moved. Then when they arrived at Peter O'Malley's at the end of the village, Kilroy had a talk with him while the men drank from milk-cans and ate home-made cake and butter rather than wait for the welcome tea which would have delayed them. Peter would tell the invading British that the Column had gone on towards the east, which would throw them off their immediate track. The RIC had also noticed the direction in which the Column had gone and they would naturally acquaint reinforcements. Had the men continued on as they purported to move, they could have been found near Aille and Castlebar, or towards Aghagower among the hills, but they turned back after a short distance when out of sight of the village, crossed the Leenane road below Cuslough, walked west and then north towards Durless below the Reek, which they reached at the

dawning. Weapons and ammunition weighted them down as they went on, but the pleasure of victory straightened them up.

Here in Durless were the two houses of the Joyces — Black Pat's and Red Pat's. They were bachelors and the Column men had an easy freedom in their houses to which they always looked forward. These houses for them were 'No Woman's Land' and some of them knew that both the Black and the Red kept a welcoming sup in a bottle. Soon two wethers were skinned and a serious massacre of duck took place. Men dozed off under cover while smells of home-cured bacon mingled with bubbling scents from iron pots, as the Joyce brothers listened to the growing epic of Carrowkennedy from a succession of narrators and concerted speech. Their hosts were as anxious to listen as the hungry men were to eat. The meal itself was a gloss on the interpolated stories, and not until the last bone was carefully sucked did stomach pang and curiosity subside.

In the morning aeroplanes were busy. There was a landing field near Castlebar and another outside of Galway. From the air the entire mountain district was slowly searched. Auxiliaries came from Galway, as well as troops and RIC, and they added to nearby garrisons, swarming like bees over the fighting ground. Divisional Commissioner Cruise was in charge of the counties of Mayo and Galway. His work was to co-ordinate constabulary and military effectiveness and being himself a County Inspector of police he could use their espionage propensities to the full for the military benefit.

Divisional Commissioner Cruise questioned the Clady people closely but no one had much information to give him, except for Peter O'Malley. Peter's careful, precise and descriptive English had now a simple scope. The Commissioner was impressed and congratulated him. As a consequence an aeroplane overhead was signalled to in morse and it flew back to Castlebar with the Commissioner's important news, adding misinformation to the additional troops there. Meanwhile the objects of the British quest were savouring the hospitality of the Joyces on the bare ridge at Durless.