

The Night the Tans Came¹

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The following is a description of the events that occurred in our house (in the townland of Shraloggy, four miles west of Newport, Co Mayo) on the night of 17 March 1921 when I was nine years old.

Foreward

The country was shocked by the Easter 1916 rebellion. Those who were not actively involved in the IRA didn't know much about it and on the whole disapproved of it. Only when the leaders of the rebellion were executed and the participants jailed, did the people become angry. Between 1916 and 1918 Sinn Féin and the IRA were able to organise this support, and they received an overwhelming majority in the June 1918 elections.

When the Great War ended in November 1918 all the Redmond volunteers who survived were very disillusioned – most of them stayed on in England, some returned and joined the IRA and continued to strive for Irish Independence. Poverty and frustration prevailed in both islands and to add to the miseries a plague (known as 'The Influenza') swept through Europe. It is said that the plague claimed as many lives as did the Great War.

St Patrick's Day 1921

The seventeenth of March 1921 was like most spring days, mild, warm and sunny, and the birds sang. We went the two and a half miles to Mass in Tír an Áir in a back-to-back horse-drawn trap, which, apart from a few old bicycles, was the only means of transport the family had. We came home, and after dinner my mother started to write a letter to America. Before doing so, she read one or two letters she had received previously. She had a brother and a sister in the States and my father had a brother and two sisters, all in Cleveland, Ohio. My mother upon reading the letters grew a bit nostalgic and shed some tears, which I thought unusual. One of the Americans said in a letter, 'I wonder will anything happen to John and Mary this Patrick's Day?' My parents were married on St Patrick's

¹ Document from library of St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.

Day and my eldest brother was born exactly a year later on 17 March. He was christened Patrick of course, and their friends had the usual jokes about the timing.

That Evening

It was practice at that time to kneel down and say the family rosary before going to bed. About 11.30 my father, mother, three brothers and sister had reached the second mystery. My sister Nora, two years older than me, was staying in my grandmother's house a mile away. Jim, another brother, came in, got himself a chair and joined in the rosary. Five minutes later the Black and Tans raided. It is difficult to describe the confusion that followed.

The front and back doors were opposite each other, both opened into the large kitchen. The back door was most frequently used and was always kept on the latch. The front was secured with a square wooden bolt and an iron keeper driven into the jamb of the door. The two Tans at each door threw their weight simultaneously – the keeper in the front flew into the kitchen, the latch gave easily.

There were six in the party. Three had their faces covered with black masks – these were the resident RIC from Newport. Of the Tans, one was an officer nicknamed 'Fudge'. I don't know if the others had any rank. They all seemed heavily intoxicated. They started to brutally interrogate my brothers with revolver butts and rifle stocks, freely threatening to shoot them if they didn't tell them the names of the leaders of the 'Shinners' – the local IRA. To say I was terrified would be putting it mildly; my heart beat wildly, I tried to scream when I saw the revolver smashing into my brother Paddy's head – but no sound came. I must have been in a state of shock. I sat on the hob beside the fire, and as the fire went out, I felt certain we were going to die. I hoped it was some sort of nightmare and that I would soon wake up. As the interrogation continued, it seemed to form a pattern; the three masked RIC men took up strategic positions at the front and back doors and one at the bedroom, the other door being adjacent to the front door.

My mother and sister, knowing that Jim was committed to the movement, thought they had come to shoot him. They clung to him, one to each arm, while he kept dodging blows and talking, trying to convince them that he was more or less on their side, that he was reared and educated by an aunt in Roscommon whose husband was an RIC man. My brother Tom tried to convince them that he minded his own business, told them that he worked on the railway near Athlone and that he went to work Monday mornings and came home on Saturday evenings. Tom was badly beaten around the head, face and body – he got off lightly enough.

Paddy, my eldest brother, was savagely beaten. I think the first few blows that he received on the head must have dazed him somewhat; he didn't dodge the subsequent blows like my other brothers. But for my father remonstrating with the Tans, I am sure they would have killed him. They mostly hit my father when

he tried to protect Paddy.

Although my brother John-Joe (17 years old at the time) was severely interrogated, he was only beaten when he tried to interfere with them beating his brothers. The three RIC men did not say or do much. They occasionally struck a few blows. Once when my sister tried to pull the mask from his face, the RIC man struck her in the ribs with his revolver.

When they had been in the house about forty minutes, I began to remember that two or three Sundays previously, my brothers were discussing how the Tans had beaten up families on the other side of Newport. The parish priest had remonstrated with the RIC and Tan officer, and they half-promised him that they wouldn't shoot anybody for the present. I started hoping that they would keep their promise and go away. About this time my father noticed me for the first time since the Tans came. He asked me where I had been all night and whether I was very frightened. I said I was and asked him if they would soon go away. He went back to Paddy again; they were threatening to kill him if he wouldn't tell them the names of the leaders.

One of the Tans found what was left of a bag of flour (about two stone). They made each of my four brothers and my father kneel down in turn and put their heads into the opening of the bag. One of them then lifted the bottom of the bag and caused a certain amount of the flour to cover their heads, half smothering them in the process. The Tans seemed to get a good lot of pleasure out of this and laughed a lot. The mixture of blood and flour made the floor become sticky. When all this was over they went back to the interrogation again.

The RIC man keeping watch at the front door decided that my mother and John-Joe were impeding the interrogations so he locked them in the front bedroom. However, there was a garret over the bedroom and a stair leading to it just inside the back door. The side to the stairway not being finished, they were able to get out to the kitchen again. After this happened three times the RIC man put them in the other bedroom and, as there was no key in the lock, he had to hold the door by the knob to keep them in.

By this time they had been in the house an hour and twenty minutes. The Tans decided to leave, taking Paddy with them to shoot him on the way out. There was one of them at each side, dragging him along. After they were gone some thirty seconds, the RIC men guarding the bedroom door left and hurried after them. My mother and John-Joe got out and hurried after them to find out what happened to Paddy, fearing to hear a shot every second. When they reached the bend in the road they saw him coming towards them. The Tans had merely pitched him into a foot of water in a sandpit on the roadside.

As they returned to the house, Paddy said he would have to warn Jack Connelly, who was likely to be armed and would surely be killed if the Tans caught him. But my mother said that he was in no state to go anywhere and that Jim would go – he was in better shape. In the meantime Jim retrieved his revolver

which was concealed under a flat stone in the wall outside the back door. He met my mother and Paddy about twenty yards from the house. If he ran along the river, he would get to Connelly's before the Tans.

When Jim left, my mother returned to the house. On seeing me, she enfolded her arms about me and said she never thought of me or saw me at all during the raid. I said that I sat on the hob and watched everything that happened. We then proceeded to clean up the house. Fresh turf was put on the fire and tea was made. There was not much damage – four chairs broken and the two doors had been forced.

When Jim got to Connelly's, Jack got dressed and they both went with their revolvers to Shralogy bridge. They arrived in time to hear the army transport pulling away. Our house was still in chaos when they returned. Jack was very concerned about us being attacked so savagely and said they should all be shot. At that time they had had difficulty procuring enough arms to start a flying column. Eventually when they did succeed, the Tans never raided again at night-time. In the morning Paddy's head was the size of a pot from the swelling and bruising, but after a week it returned to normal.

Epilogue

The British called a truce in July 1921. During the Treaty talks which followed, Jim went away and took courses in army engineering, and was promoted to Staff Captain. Although they were offered high rank and salaries in the Free State army, Jim and all his comrades took the Republican side in the Civil War. What was most repugnant to them was the oath of allegiance to a British monarch that was embodied in the Treaty. They worked hard to avert the Civil War but sooner than accept the Treaty, they reformed the battalion and continued the fight.

The Republicans, referred to as the 'Irregulars' by the media, were doomed from the start. The Free State Provisional Government had the finance, the means of propaganda, and the guns and artillery supplied by Britain. The Government had the support of the Catholic Hierarchy, and also of those who were later to be known as the Ascendancy, who were more English than the English themselves and regarded the Treaty as the lesser of two evils. Integrated with these was the British Secret Service; together they made a formidable, if unseen force. In the late spring of 1923 the IRA got orders to dump arms and take up the struggle at some future date.

On 7 March 1923 Jim was killed in action by the Free State army in the Glenhest mountains, about three miles north of Newport. My brother Tom was imprisoned for most of the Civil War. Paddy acted as a scout for the IRA but didn't carry arms. Almost all of the men who took part in the struggle emigrated to America or to Britain.