

The Queen of the West

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Armoured cars became fashionable in armies during the 1914-18 War. Crude prototypes were first seen in Ireland when they were used to quell the 1916 Insurrection in Dublin. Later, during the Irish War of Independence, more powerful and heavily armed cars were used to great effect by the British Army, especially in Dublin. When the Irish Free State Provisional Government was set up in January 1922, the British Government handed over thirteen Rolls Royce Whippet armoured cars to it.¹ This gesture was in anticipation of the trouble that lay ahead for the Free State Government. On receiving these armoured cars, each army unit gave the vehicles nicknames, e.g., The Big Fellow, Slievenaman, The Ballinalee, The Baby, etc. One such vehicle, The Big Fella, was landed at Westport Quay from the *SS Minerva*, when the Free State Army took Westport by surprise.² The Free State Army used this armoured car as they took all the Republican positions at Westport and Castlebar. Armoured cars were essential weapons for frontal attacks on occupied positions, especially buildings, where the attackers could bring their mounted Vickers Machine Gun into action, while under full armoured protection.

The Republican forces of the 4th Western Division had no such weapons of war, as they prepared to defend the Republic in their area.³ Indeed, most Republican means of transport, bicycles, cars and trucks, had to be commandeered. The IRA had managed to capture a Free State Army armoured car at the battle for Ballina, but for some unknown reason this vehicle had to be abandoned. In late 1922, the IRA was intent on recapturing the town of Clifden from the Free State Army. The use of an armoured car would be essential for this assault, and so it was that plans were made for the construction of such a vehicle. North of Newport was safely in Republican hands, so it was decided to build the armoured car at Mulranny. Thomas Moran of Mulranny, known locally as 'Number Nine', was the main mover involved. He was a motor mechanic by trade and owned a well-stocked workshop beside his home, which was also a licensed premises. General Michael Kilroy was fully behind the idea, as he himself had long entertained the idea of using armoured cars.⁴

Thomas Moran and his helpers set to work with enthusiasm. He had already selected a vehicle that would be suitable for the task. This was a large open-backed touring car, which when stripped of its rear seats and folding hood would be suitable for accommodating an armoured compartment. This armoured area was to be made from a large cylindrical boiler that supplied the hot water for the



Thomas Moran and his wife Margaret outside No. 9, Mulranny, c.1947.

(Photo: Courtesy V. Keane)

central heating in the Great Southern Hotel at Mulranny. The manageress of the hotel was a Miss Brosnan, a Kerry woman and a Republican supporter, and she was agreeable to the removal of the boiler. Moran brought his stripped touring car to the hotel grounds and the boiler was fitted to it. On a test run it was found that the engine of the car would not be strong enough to pull the extra weight of the boiler and five riflemen. The car was now brought back to Moran's workshop and the engine was removed. A much more powerful engine from a Crossley Tender was now fitted, and this proved very suitable.⁵ More rigorous tests were conducted and the vehicle was nicknamed *Fág an Ballagh*, but this was later changed to *The Queen of the West*.⁶

The attack on the Free State Army positions at Clifden was planned for Sunday 29 October 1922. The logistics were completed and the men were assembled. 'On October 26th, a fully equipped IRA active service unit, comprising of 4 Ford cars, 3 lorries, and 39 cyclists, with the armoured car, left Newport'.⁷ It is not known what route the main column took from Newport to Clifden. The road between Newport and Westport had been made impassable by the destruction of the bridges at Rossow and Buckfield. This was a necessary step to stop the Free State Army advancing on Newport. One section of cyclist riflemen took a

very circuitous route on the occasion, going via Fahy, Islandeady, Aughagower, and then up the Erriff Valley, to reach the Leenane road.⁸ The IRA units gathered at Kylemore Abbey, where final plans were made and ammunition was distributed. General Kilroy had been summoned to an IRA Executive meeting at Field GHQ in the Waterford mountains, so his adjutant, Petie Joe McDonnell, took command of the operation at Clifden.

After a long eight-hour battle, the Free State Army garrisons at Clifden, and at the Marconi Station, surrendered. How did the *Queen of the West* perform on the day? There are conflicting reports from participants in the battle. One IRA man was full of praise for the *Queen*.⁹ He recalled how the armoured car was driven right to the front door of the old RIC barracks in Clifden. There, the IRA engineers were able to place their mines, which when exploded were instrumental in forcing the surrender of the stronghold. Another Republican soldier claimed that the vehicle had not been of much use, as the Free State soldiers had shot its tyres off, immobilising it.¹⁰

The battle of Clifden may have been won, but the war for The Republic was eventually lost. Thomas Moran, designer, builder and driver of the *Queen* was eventually arrested, and with 11,000 other Republicans was interned until 1924 by the Free State Government. On his release from captivity in 1924, Moran returned to his home in Mulranny. He found that his home, pub and workshop had been completely ruined and ransacked by Free State Army raiding parties. This occurred after the fall of Newport to Government forces on 24 November 1922. He now sought compensation in the newly formed Free State court system for loss of property and structural damage. He was unsuccessful at the first court hearing, so he appealed the decision. The appeal hearing was held at Castlebar Assizes on 18 March 1925. Thomas Moran in court claimed that he had lost one 3-ton truck, 3 motor cars, 1 motorcycle, bicycles, and barrels of porter and whiskey. He was also claiming for structural damage and for the repair of bullet holes in the galvanised roof. The Free State witnesses agreed that some porter had been taken for refreshments, but that there had been only one vehicle, a motor car, at his workshop. Moran lost the appeal, as it was pointed out to the court that he was a person that had taken arms against the government, and this disqualified him from receiving compensation. Commandant Seán Neary, who was in charge of government forces in the Mulranny area, had ordered the Free State Army raids.

What became of the *Queen*? It was apparently unable to make the return journey from Clifden to Mulranny and the Free State Army reinforcements took possession of it. It was then driven to Westport and paraded as a trophy of war. They had now renamed it, sarcastically, *The girl I left behind me*. It is thought

that this one and only Republican armoured car was kept at the Military Barracks in Mullingar for some years after 1922.¹¹

Notes

1. The armoured cars received by the Free State Government were part of a consignment that had been ordered by the British Army, at a cost of £2000 each. These were delivered to the British Army on 21 November 1920. Thirteen were given to the Free State Army in 1922. Only two of these vehicles have survived, one in a museum in England and one in the custody of the Irish Army at the Curragh Military Camp. Information from Bob Webster and Veronica Tracey at ([HTTP:// WWW ESAT.IE/Curragh/SLIABHNAMBAN.HTM](http://www.esat.ie/Curragh/SLIABHNAMBAN.HTM)).
2. The Free State Army made a successful, and unchallenged, landing at Westport Quay on 24 July 1922. They were led by Colonel Joe Ring, and had earlier landed at Rosmoney Coastguard Station, which had been used as a prison by the IRA. Up to one hundred Free State Army prisoners were released. The armoured car was lifted off the steamer by the derrick of a dredger that was engaged at clearing the channel at the Quay.
3. The 4th Western Division was set up in 1921, when GHQ broke down the IRA into more manageable units. This Division was an amalgamation of the North Mayo, West Mayo and Connemara Brigades. It covered an area west of a line from Spiddal to Ballina. Its officers at the start of the Civil War were Michael Kilroy, O/C, Petie Joe McDonnell, Adjutant, and Jack Feehan, Q.M.
4. During the fighting in Dublin in 1916, Kilroy had contemplated constructing an armoured car, using the metal plating from the bridge at Newport Rail station. (Information from *The Awakening* by Michael Kilroy.)
5. It is thought that the Auxiliary RIC had left this engine with Moran for repairs in 1921.
6. The vehicle would again be renamed *The girl I left behind me* when the Free State army took possession of it, when it was abandoned after the successful battle to retake Clifden. A photograph of the *Queen*, in Free State Army possession, can be seen in *My Stand For Freedom* by Joe Baker.
7. 'The War of Independence and the Civil War' by Willie Sammon in *Back the road*, Vol. 1, No. 2.
8. The late Mick Tunney of Derrykillew, Cushlough and Glasnevin gave this information to this writer before he died in 1991. Mick had taken part in the Civil War and had been imprisoned at Westport Workhouse, from where he escaped, and at Rath Internment Camp at the Curragh.
9. From 'John Joe Philbin' by Michael MacEivilly in *Survivors* by Uinsionn MacEoin (1987). Philbin also relates that the drivers of the *Queen* were Thomas Moran and Tommy Joe Gibbons of the Quay Road, Westport. Gibbons was a brother of Johnny Gibbons who later became Divisional Adjutant to General Kilroy.
10. Information from Jarlath Duffy from tape recording of his late uncle, Commandant Paddy Duffy, Q.M. of the West Mayo Brigade at the time of the Clifden attacks.
11. Information from Willie Sammon, Newport Historical Society.

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