

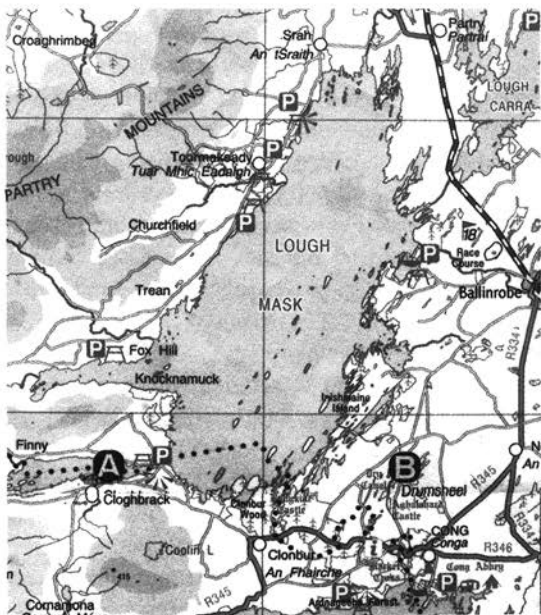
The Tourmakeady Ambush, May 1921 – Part I

Seán Ó hÓgáin

Location

Tourmakeady lies on the western side of Lough Mask in County Mayo. The main road through the village leads north from Tourmakeady to the village of Srah, where it forks towards Castlebar and eastward towards Partry. The main road south from the village stretches to Derrypark and Maamtrasna, where a fork runs past the shores of Lough Nafooyey and into the Maam valley. The other fork goes eastward to Finny where it turns north toward Cong, Cross and eventually Ballinrobe. A western road in the village goes over the mountains, via the townland of Tunasaile towards Westport.

The mountains on the western shores of Lough Mask were scoured by movements of massive melting ice at the end of the last ice age and are marvellous examples of glacial erosion. This can be seen most vividly along the southern section of the lake, where the high cliffs of Scolteach with its peak at Maamtrasna, 700 metres, run northward to Buckaun where the mountains, after crossing the Owenbhrin valley, climb to heights of 600 metres which run as far as Srah. These heights are cut by streams and rivers that have gouged out large scars in the mountainside. Other important locations on the lake are the popular fishing area of Cushlough on the Ballinrobe side of the lake, and an equally popular fishing area at the mouth of the Doiremhoir river, east of the village of Srah.



Lough Mask and surrounding area.

History

The Lough Mask area had a troubled time in the decades between the Famine and the War of Independence. The sale of the Moore estate, based at Moore Hall on the banks of Lough Carra, as a result of debts incurred in the Famine, led to the entry of the Plunkett family to Tourmakeady. They quickly established a big house and a rectory and set about a campaign of proselytisation. The forceful conversion of Catholics was not appreciated by the clergy or their flock and passive resistance soon led to open hostilities and murder (Moran, 1986). The local curate at the time, Fr Lavelle, radicalised the population into resistance, though the involvement of the Fenian movement in the disturbances at Tourmakeady in those times is not clear (Moran, 1994). However, it is clear that the Plunkett family, as representatives of both the landlord class and the established religion, was a feared and hated family.

Agitation against landlords and their agents in the area is further evidenced in the murder of an agent of Lord Ardilaun and his grandson in the Derrypark area (Waldron, 1992). Their bodies were found at the bottom of the lake and it is the repercussions of this gruesome find that ultimately led to the Maamtrasna murders which infamously raised the profile of the area (Harrington, 1884; McAree, 1990). The subsequent hangings of three local men only increased the politicisation and awareness process begun after the Famine (Waldron, 1992).

On the eastern shores of the lake, at approximately the same time, the process of agitation was reaching its most well known organised action, in the Land League agitation that surrounded the figure of Captain Boycott (Moody, 1981). There had been a good Fenian organisation in South Mayo.¹ 'The men that made the backbone of the Land League in 1879 and after in the Plan of Campaign were Fenians' (Mac Eoin, 1980). The ostracisation of this landlord's agent was due to the imposition of exorbitant rent increases. This agitation became so famous that it gave rise to a new English verb, arising from the agent's name (Boycott, 1997).

It is no surprise then that with this degree of awareness and agitation, the Lough Mask region saw one of the most colourful engagements of the War of Independence.

IRA Organisation in the Lough Mask Region

It is not clear whether the republican movement in Ballinrobe formally existed prior to the Rising.² Ballinrobe had often served as a recruiting centre for the British Army during the years of the First World War. However, following the

country-wide uproar as a result of the 1916 executions, the threat of conscription led to the old alliance of priests and people protesting against the forced enlistment in the British Army. It was early 1918 that Joe Forde and George Bell addressed a meeting in Donnellan's Wood, just outside Ballinrobe. They asked for volunteers and three men turned up, being Pat Kennedy, Michael Jennings and Anthony Doordan, all from Rahard. These were the first volunteers in the Ballinrobe Company, which by the end of 1918 had grown to a strength of over thirty men. Both Forde and Bell were arrested for wearing Volunteer uniforms in Ballinrobe (Kennedy, 1966).

A second company formed in Cross by Tom Maguire, before the end of 1918, meant that Ballinrobe was the centre of a battalion of four companies, these being Ballinrobe Company, Cross Company, Ballyglass Company and Srah Company (Kennedy, 1996).³ During 1919 recruiting and training continued. Arms were collected or taken in raids while most households contributed £1 to buy arms and ammunition. In 1920 Mayo was divided into four brigades where previously there had been only one. The South Mayo Brigade had Tom Maguire as Brigade Commandant with Michael O'Brien appointed Brigade Adjutant.⁴ As the year 1920 progressed, proposed IRA attacks became more frequent, but police activity and searches for arms, together with arrests and beatings, made military actions increasingly difficult for Brigade members. Those men prominent in the IRA began to feel it was unsafe to sleep at home and so a flying column, based mainly in Cahir and Clooneneagh, came into existence (Kennedy).⁵

At a Mayo Brigade conference held in January 1921, the staffs of the four Mayo Brigades agreed that each brigade should mount a major operation against the Crown forces as soon as possible. The urgency of this decision was reinforced by the realisation that until then no major operation against the Crown forces had been undertaken in the south of the county (Buckley, 1999). As a result the Ballyglass and Srah Companies drew up plans for an ambush in March 1921. Ballinrobe was then garrisoned by the Border Regiment, and a lorry of these troops routinely journeyed to Castlebar. On 7 March 1921, men from both companies went into position on the Partry road at the townland of Kilfaul, just north of Portroyal. As the lorry, under the command of Captain Chatfield, approached the ambush, fire was opened and the driver hit and the lorry stopped. Many of the soldiers got out through the back of the lorry and returned fire. After a short sharp engagement they retreated towards Ballinrobe, leaving their lorry and its contents behind.⁶ One member of the British Forces was killed and two were injured (Buckley, 1999).⁷ Intense police and army activity followed this ambush, and a man in Srah, who had nothing to do with the ambush, was shot while sitting by his own fireside (Kennedy, 1966). This was said to be the first engagement against British military forces in south Mayo since 1798.⁸

Strategy

As the year 1921 progressed, police in outlying stations began to feel unsafe and isolated and some barracks were actually closed. One isolated station was at Derrypark where the barracks was a strongly-built house under the cliff-edged brows of Buckaun Mountain. It had been built in the 1880s after the Maamtrasna murders (Waldron, 1992). The post looked down on Lough Mask and across to the wooded eastern shore of the lake towards Ballinrobe, the local police headquarters, which was about eight miles away as the crow flies – though by road it would be closer on twenty miles. It had been built on an elevated piece of land, commanded the approaches on all sides, and was almost impossible to attack with the weapons then in the possession of the IRA. There was a garrison of twelve RIC in Derrypark but of late it was isolated, as two barracks, in Partry and Ballyglass, had withdrawn their garrisons for safety. Other smaller barracks in the area had also been cleared, namely, Cross, Cong and Clonbur (Mac Eoin, 1980). Although their fighting and aggressive strength had been stiffened with Black and Tans, the uncertainty that existed among the constabulary in small posts in remote districts helped to wear down their nerves.

In many places they were an outpost beleaguered more by the withdrawal of the surrounding people and the menace of encircling hills than by the threat of IRA efficiency (O'Malley, 1982). Derrypark barracks was supplied from Ballinrobe by the RIC and Black and Tans, who brought resident RIC men pay and provisions on a fixed day each month. The IRA watched the convoy, which varied in strength from a motor car and a Crossley tender to a car in front and two lorries following, and when their reports had been forwarded through the battalion, the Brigade decided to deal with this force (Kennedy, 1966; O'Malley, 1982).⁹ However, the exact day was not known, and it was not clear whether this was to be the first, second or third of the month (Mac Eoin, 1980).

The staff of the South Mayo Brigade made plans to attack the convoy. The route from Ballinrobe to Derrypark was surveyed and a stretch of road with its centrepoint at Tourmakeady Post Office was chosen for the attack. The plan involved occupying the post office and as soon as the lorries arrived, cutting the telephone lines (Kennedy, 1966). The IRA Volunteers had lines of return to their houses mapped for each of them. The IRA men in Tourmakeady were to be alerted to the intended time of departure of the convoy by a volunteer in Ballinrobe. It was normal for the Police, on the morning of their run to Derrypark, to place an order for rations in a wholesale shop, Birmingham & Co., in Ballinrobe. It took at least two hours to fill the order, and it was arranged that as soon as the order came in, an employee of the firm would get word to a scout who would bring the message to those waiting in Tourmakeady.



Birmingham's shop, Bridge Street, Ballinrobe, as it appeared c. 1875.

(Lawrence Photo)

Action

Operations were begun on the night of Saturday 30 April 1921, with the assembly of men, arms and equipment at Cahir. The O.C. was Brigadier Tom Maguire with Commandant Michael O'Brien second in command. Paddy May of Kilkeeran, Captain of the Ballinrobe Company, was third in command. As night fell the assembly moved on to Cushlough. Here the party split in two with one group under the command of Tom Burke boating across the lake, while the rest of the company went on foot. Boats were waiting at Pete Burke's of Cushlough, and eleven men from the Cloonliffen school area were rowed over from there.¹⁰

It took about three hours for the boating party to cross the lake. The boatmen found it difficult to get their bearings in the dark, and a light, which should have been shown to guide them, was missing. Their progress was further hampered by the fact that the boatmen feared there might be Black and Tans about. They landed safely near the Derryvore Bridge, on the Partry-Srah road (Kennedy, 1966).

The main body of the column of men that went on foot crossed the river Robe at Cushlough and went through Creagh, cross-country towards Keel Bridge. This was considered the most dangerous section of the march, and the road each side of the bridge was well scouted. After crossing the bridge they left the main road at the turnoff for Aughnish. This cross-country section of the route was over very rough terrain and was not made any easier by the darkness of the night.

They eventually rejoined the Partry-Srah road near the Derryvore Bridge and met the party of men who had crossed by boat. Scouts from Srah informed the Column that the road to Srah was clear, and they marched by road to Srah. Here they were sent to houses higher up the mountain overlooking Srah, on the eastern flank of the Partry mountains, and went to bed (Kennedy, 1966).

Sunday 1 May was a beautiful morning. All members of the IRA column lay low for fear of their presence becoming known to the police and military. On Monday guns and ammunition were inspected and each man's cartridges were fitted to his gun.¹¹ The majority of the men were armed with shotguns, which were only useful at short range. The officers decided to go into ambush on the next morning, Tuesday 3 May. At one or two a.m. the men fell in on the Srah-Tourmakeady road near the bridge south of the Srah Post Office. They marched to Tourmakeady and reached the Fair Green before daybreak. Each man had a small ration of food as well as his equipment and this they decided to eat before going into position. They were expecting two lorries and a touring car, spread out at intervals of about three hundred yards. As the intervening ground was wooded in places and the road wound quickly out of view, each section in the attack would have to be self-contained. The men were divided into three sections, one unit of sixteen men for each of the expected vehicles, and spaced apart at the distance to be expected between the lorries and the car.

Maguire wished to divide the available force fairly with the officers who would take command of the other two units so he allowed them in turn to select their pick of the men. The first pick of sixteen men went to Paddy May, the youngest of the three senior officers. Michael O'Brien got second choice and the Commander took the remaining men to the centre position at the Post Office.¹² The men under Paddy May's command went two hundred yards further along the road, near the entrance to Drimbawn House and placed themselves in the shrubbery there. They were on the east or lake side of the road, behind a double wall, and with a wood at their backs. From this position they had a good view of anything approaching from the north or Srah side. As they waited, any passers-by were put in with the other prisoners (Kennedy, 1966). The group under Michael O'Brien, the Brigade Adjutant, was placed at the Fair Green, to the north of the village. They were on the west side of the road, behind a fence on the south side of the Fair Green. Across the road towards the lake was a double wall and the chances of a policeman escaping over this within range of the unit's guns were poor. Three men were placed inside the wall at the road junction opposite Hewitt's Hotel, as it then was. A few contact men were placed between the groups, flanks were protected by the units themselves and the total number of activists amounted to little more than fifty men. Armament, slenderly effective for the attack, consisted of six rifles only, so that shotguns of varying degrees of usefulness had to pad out



Hewitt's Hotel, home of the O'Toole family since 1930. Photo courtesy Tomás O'Toole.

the striking power.¹³ The wooded ground, however, suited shorter-range weapons; success would depend upon their initial use (O'Malley, 1982). The plan for the ambush was to let the car through till it reached the most southerly group of men under May's command and by then it was hoped that each of the other two groups would have a lorry in such a position as to attack it.

The guests in Hewitt's Hotel, among them the local doctor, Dr Murphy (later of Cong) and his wife, and some policemen's wives, were taken to a safer place, and put under guard in the house of P. Maloney (Kennedy, 1982).¹⁴ It was essential to the success of the ambush that none should escape, especially any of the policemen's wives, and the guard was ordered in their presence to shoot anyone who tried to get out before the fight started. Others who happened to come to the Post Office or who saw any of the volunteers along the road joined these prisoners. The local curate came along in his horse and trap, was not stopped, and noticed nothing unusual (Kennedy, 1966).

The Volunteers who occupied the Post Office examined the recently posted letters as they waited for the enemy (O'Malley, 1982).¹⁵ In this instance the letters would be forwarded either to the District Inspector of Police in Ballinrobe or to some of the constabulary who had formerly served in Tourmakeady and who had since been withdrawn to the safety of the strong post in the next town. When the letters had been read through they were sealed up again, but across the envelopes was a new notice 'Censored by IRA' (O'Malley, 1982).¹⁶

In Ballinrobe, scouts watched both the RIC and the military barracks. When the police in a car and a Crossley tender had drawn up at Birmingham's to buy provisions for the Derrypark garrison, in keeping with the recently established routine, Pádraic Feeney set out by bicycle to bring this information but he did not reach the Brigadier in time. Another volunteer who worked in Birmingham's, Patrick Vahey, was able to get through and take a despatch to the IRA in the village just ahead of the enemy convoy.⁴⁷

The expected car came about noon. The driver and most of the passengers were probably killed in the first volley fired from Drimbawn gate. The car crashed into the wall almost opposite Michael Shaughnessy of Cross, the only man with a rifle. There was some return fire from the car, but it was quickly silenced. The driver, a Black and Tan, and the other three or four policemen were dead. Six rifles and ammunition were taken from the car and the volunteers withdrew. However, it was now clear that instead of the usual two lorries only one lorry was with the car that day. At the sound of the firing the Crossley halted between the first and second IRA positions and was fired on by the unit led by Michael O'Brien to whose assistance the Column Commander sent half of his own men. Then, with the remainder of his section, Maguire advanced down the road to join in the fight against the first police car. He found this group of RIC was out of action, all of them being dead. However, with the noise of rifle fire coming from the village, Maguire was anxious to move in that direction to find out exactly what was happening.

The remaining police from the Crossley were under the charge of a head constable. He directed them while they carried their wounded and held off their attackers, behind the lorry and whatever cover they could get, until they reached Hewitt's Hotel a little in from the roadside, beside a crossroads. They were then secure enough in a well-built house and they knew that if they were able to maintain their position the RIC in Derrypark, who had probably heard the firing, would be able to get a message through to Ballinrobe for reinforcements. The RIC in the hotel came under fire from the three men posted behind the wall at the road junction. There was a small plantation nearby from which the two rifles in O'Brien's command were being used. As soon as the RIC located the sound they used rifle grenades against their hidden attackers, and the bursting metal splinters made the shelter of the young trees a lesser security. O'Brien felt he could not achieve anything from his position and withdrew his men and the police slipped into the hotel. Tom Maguire came up with help from the centre position, but the police were now safe in the hotel. He had no immediate plan for attacking the hotel, and to organise even an impromptu attempt on the building would take some time. There had been no preparations made to cut roads, fell trees or destroy culverts so as to delay reinforcements, as it had been thought that the police

would be forced to surrender soon after the action had begun. It was essential to move the Column away into the mountains and to disband the local Volunteers. After examining the Drimbawn gate position he withdrew his men up the mountain, making northwards along the upper slopes towards Srah.

In the heat of the moment the telephone in the Post Office was either forgotten or not properly put out of action, with the result that the police and military in Ballinrobe and the other towns in the area were on the road for Tourmakeady within the hour (Kennedy, 1966). The men on the mountains could see the lorries passing Keel Bridge, and the clouds of dust rising from the then untarred roads as the British soldiers drew nearer.

Follow-up

High on the mountain, in a fold of the ground overlooking Srah, the volunteers waited. Maguire intended to cross the road from Castlebar to Ballinrobe as he knew there was insufficient cover in the hills. Most of the local volunteers had already been dismissed and had made for the hills, but Maguire kept a few of them to act as guides. Twelve lorries were counted coming over a rise on the Partry-Tourmakeady road. As he counted the dust clouds Maguire knew that Galway, a brigade headquarters, and possibly Claremorris, had sent on troops. The lorries passed on towards the village while the Column men took cover, but evidently the soldiers knew where to seek their quarry. Lorries halted at intervals along the lakeshore, soldiers and bottle-green police jumped out and were soon slowly making their way up in extended order towards the hills. Some of the lorries passed on to Tourmakeady and Maguire guessed that they would cross by the mountain road to Westport, and when they reached the far slopes they would steadily help to encircle his Column.

The Column now moved northwards. With it were some Srah men who knew the lines of the hills as they knew the creases in the palms of their hands, but the Column itself consisted mostly of men from the Ballinrobe battalion and they were not so limber as the Srah men (O'Malley, 1982). The direction of the Column was changed again, further to the north, for that point would bring it across the hills which were about 1,200 feet high and topped by a plateau. However, as soon as the men commenced to climb, the British followed them up. The men scattered out along the hillside and used their few rifles, but the British picked out the direction in which they were moving by the sound of their rifle shots and closed in on them. The Column hurried up the hills towards the road from Westport to Ballinrobe but, as the men climbed, their scouts found that military and constabulary, who had come from Westport and Castlebar, were now stretched across the eastern slopes, barring their way to safety. These fresh



Monument to Pádhraic Feeney, member of the I.R.A. Photo courtesy Tomás O'Toole.

reinforcements were still at a distance but they used their machine-guns at long range, prior to moving close.

The Column men looked about them for a position which might give them cover and which they could hold when the ring tightened around them. By this time they were high above Tournawoad village. Maguire, with his officers, picked a fold in the ground formed by a table of stone with a steep drop to the south and behind it a rise of ground. In Irish the place is known as 'Rock of the Sally Trees', but there are no sally trees there any longer. It was now one o'clock and the men extended lines and settled down for a long fight. About twenty-five or thirty men, with Tom Maguire at one end of the line and Michael O'Brien at the other, lay in cover watching down the slopes.

Soon after the IRA had left the village the RIC were able to venture out. They made use of the telegraph in the post office, but a wireless transmitter in the barracks at Derrypark had already sent information to Ballinrobe about the attack on the convoy. In Hewitt's Hotel a young man by the name of Pádhraic Feeney was being called out by the police. He worked in his father's shop in Glebe Street, Ballinrobe. When word had arrived that morning that the police had ordered their supplies for Derrypark Barracks, Feeney had set off on his bicycle to get word to the Volunteers in Tourmakeady. It is thought that the police convoy must have passed him on the road, and that he must have known that his message was too late. Perhaps he wanted to join his comrades and help them, but ran into the police instead. At any rate he was a prisoner in Hewitt's Hotel soon after the ambush. After a time police came into the room and called him out. A woman

asked where they were bringing the boy, and they told her he would be alright. A few moments later shots were heard and Feeney lay dead. He was the first volunteer to lose his life in the action, at the age of twenty-two.¹⁸

When the action at Drimbawn gate was over, some half-dozen men, among them Pat Kennedy and Michael Mellett, withdrew towards the lake through the wood, and set off northwards by the lake. They soon came under fire from the police at Hewitt's Hotel, but got through safely and crossed the road toward the mountains, at the Franciscan monastery, which was opposite the present Tourmakeady convent. They moved north until they reached the village of Srah, where they had slept the night before. Here they met a man with a rifle named Michael Costelloe, a native of Srah, and an ex-British Army man. They did not know it at the time but he had fought as a member of the Srah Company in the Kilfaul ambush of 7 March.

A lorry-load of soldiers came and stopped at Srah, on the road below the men, and the soldiers began to climb the mountain. A man in shirt and trousers was in front of them as they climbed, past the volunteers up the mountain. The volunteers, who had fought at Drimbawn gate, had taken cover in the bed of a stream and moved up the gully and crossed the ridge to the west side of the mountain. Michael Costelloe brought them to a police barracks called Kinury in which there were eight policemen. The volunteers lay in cover round the barracks till



Michael Costelloe.

Photo courtesy Tomás O'Toole.

dusk in the hope of attacking the police if they came out. After dark, they made their way along the mountain till they came out on the Ballinrobe-Westport road near the Goats Hotel. About one or two a.m. they called to a farmhouse that had light showing. The woman of the house gave them an unforgettable meal of bacon and eggs (Kennedy, 1966). From there they went across the bogs and fields to Ballintubber, and went on north of Lough Carra until they came to Ballyglass. Two of the group, Pat Kennedy and Éamonn Jennings went on to Newbrook Cross through Robeen and across the Robe river at Robeen Bridge, and on to Cloonacastle and the house of a friend.

(To be concluded in next issue)

Notes

1. In the book *Survivors*, Tom Maguire talks to Uinseann Mac Eoin about his father, who was active in the Fenian Movement and the Republican movement in his native South Mayo.
2. According to an account given by Pat Kennedy to the pupils in Cloonliffen National School, Ballinrobe, and written up by John Colleran, a branch of Fianna Éireann was set up by Michael Farragher, Tom Coyne and Henry Flynn in 1916. Pat Kennedy remembers these three men going up Main Street with a lighted torch, honouring the men of 1916. Subsequently Kennedy joined the others, to the amusement of the local constabulary.
3. Maguire states that 'the first properly organised company in this area was formed in 1917.' It is not clear whether he is referring to Cross only, or the Ballinrobe area. He continues 'When the conscription crisis of April 1918 broke we were flooded out with recruits. I welcomed them in, but although I did so, I thought I should test them out on a few route marches. That finished most of them; they melted away. There is a story told of a man at Stations here who was asked by the priest in Confession, 'were you ever in the IRA?' 'I was indeed,' answered the man, but Tom Maguire brought us on a few marches for a couple of nights and I could not keep up with him' (Mac Eoin, 1980).
4. Michael Kilroy was active in West Mayo. Later he was appointed O.C. of the Fourth Western Division, which included North Mayo, West Mayo and Connemara.
5. According to Pat Kennedy's account 'they often stayed in Cahir and Mellet's of Cloonenagh, and indeed anywhere they might be safe and welcome. Michael Mellet of Cloonenagh remembers being awakened at home in bed by police prodding him with rifles. The house was surrounded. At the time a man from the mountains was employed as a helper on the farm. This man wore a báinín and when the police saw this they thought they had a capture. After a while he said he should go out to look at the sheep, and the police let him go. It was a ruse to go across to Cahir and warn the flying column' (Kennedy, 1966).
6. Maguire mentions a Martin Conroy from Gortnacoiile near Srah as being a good shot, and he chose him to 'bring down the driver of the lorry. If you had him, you had the rest of them copped . . . To make sure however I placed three men . . . Martin, then another, then another.' He also speaks of a volunteer who 'was a good hefty lad . . . placed at the rear. He had been in the R.I.C but came out and brought a supply of Mills bombs with him. The leading lorry appeared and with that my marksmen's shots rang out. The fight was on with a few short bursts, and the ex-R.I.C. man, I could see, was busy throwing his little grenades. But he must not have known to remove the pin because they were rolling down the road like pebbles and not exploding.' Maguire also mentions 'an ex-Irish Guards man with us that day, a man by the name of Michael Costello. Picking up one of our unexploded grenades, I saw him pull the pin out. "What are you doing with that?" said I. "I am going to lob it into the middle of these bastards." "Now, none of that," said I, holding his hand. Reluctantly he held his thumb upon the spring. "You don't know the . . . as long as I do." I succeeded in taking the grenade from him' (Mac Eoin, 1980).
7. Ó Brádaigh gives an account of the Kilfall ambush where 'four soldiers fled, one was wounded and the rest surrendered to Volunteers armed with shotguns using buckshot, Six to eight service rifles were now in their possession' (Ó Brádaigh, 1997).
8. Significant actions had taken place in East and North Mayo in 1920. These included attacks on the British Forces at Swinford in July and Ballyhaunis in August (resulting in five wounded) and the Royal Irish Constabulary at Ballina. The latter attack occurred on 22 July and resulted in one RIC death and one wounded (Buckley, 1999). Maguire also mentions providing protection for two members of the First Dáil Éireann Land Courts to be held in Ballinrobe in May 1920. Art O'Connor, B.L. and Kevin Shiels were there constituting the court. The purpose of the court was to decide on the ownership of lands that had been cleared, sometimes falsely, in the name of the I.R.A. (Mac Eoin, 1980).
9. Ernie O'Malley gives a characteristically descriptive and literary account of this process. 'Tom Maguire, the Brigadier of South Mayo, commanded a Column of twenty-five men who had been on the watch for random movements of British military or constabulary by road. They had been out many early mornings in frosty weather when long waiting was hard both on nerve and body, but nothing had recently come their way. The rainy climate of the West added another burden to late winter and the early spring. The men had been sleeping out in the woods on straw, covered by blankets given to them by local friendly people. This method of protection meant that if one portion of the Column was attacked it could be relieved by another group, but this also put an additional strain on the outposts to prevent the surprise of the

concentrated unit. Nonetheless, if attacked in the open, the Column men felt they could fight without endangering the people of the nearest houses' (O'Malley, 1982). Maguire's version is that 'ever since Kilfall we were on our keeping, a flying column of around thirty men out in the open country sleeping where we could and when we could. The local units in each village were in an important back-up position, not seemingly doing much, but contributing a lot in the way of supplies, intelligence, safe houses and of course impeding the enemy at every hand's turn (Mac Eoin, 1980).

10. These men were Tom Burke (in command of the boat party), Tom Healy and Tom Cahalan both from Cahir, Pat Kennedy, brothers Edward and John Jennings, John Sullivan from Rahard, Michael Mellett, Cloononagh, Edward Cameron, Corthun and the brothers Jack and Jim Duffy of Clogher (Kennedy, 1966).
11. An anecdote is told by Pat Kennedy of a man on the mountainside drying cartridges in the sun on a sheet of corrugated iron. Shotgun cartridges were the usual form of ammunition, and these were refilled with buckshot, which meant that some would not fit into the guns (Kennedy, 1966).
12. One of the men placed inside the Post Office was Jack Ferguson, on the run from his home in Leitrim. Seeing Tom Maguire going about among his men outside, the postmistress, a Mrs. Billington, asked Ferguson who was the man outside. 'Michael Collins' he replied. 'Do you think Mr Collins would like a cup of tea?' she asked and it is reported that 'Mr Collins' did have a cup of tea (Kennedy, 1966).
13. The account of Pat Kennedy states that there was only one rifle available, while O'Malley's account states that there were six. Perhaps the confusion has to do with the fact that Kennedy's account is largely referring to the action at Drimbawn gate, where there was only one rifle and O'Malley's account refers to the number of rifles available to the whole force involved in the attack.
14. The accounts differ on how the locals and those in Hewitt's were dealt with. O'Malley says 'The people in the scattered homes which formed the two Tourmakeady villages were brought away from the danger zone and placed in an end house under guard. This ensured that the villagers would be sheltered from possible danger which the attack might occasion them, but it also meant that their movements and their talk would be restricted through this security. Among the temporary prisoners were an RIC pensioner and his wife. The woman attempted to escape at about the time she expected the convoy would arrive, but before she was able to warn them of the hidden groups of men she had been recaptured' (O'Malley, 1982).
15. Often it had been found that real, or supposed information, from people friendly to the enemy, about the activities of the IRA or of members of the Sinn Féin clubs, could be found in the post bags. Deliberate intention, jealousy, petty spite, or the country closeness, which rubs raw spots until they fester into a rash of rancour, were at the base of this type of petty spying' (O'Malley, 1982).
16. O'Malley relates the anecdote that the volunteers discovered that 'amongst the Tourmakeady post office mail was a letter from England from the wife of a Black and Tan. Her husband, who was serving in the massy isolation of Derrypark, had not been sending home what she regarded as her due of his good pay. Tans were usually heavy drinkers and the local porter helped to soothe the outpost uncertainty and remoteness. The wife's furious letter of protest wound up with the intriguing question: "How do you expect me to go out to my friends' houses when I have no blasted shoes?"' (O'Malley, 1982).
17. Neither Kennedy nor O'Malley mention Patrick Vahey, although they do relate Pádraic Feeney's experience of being passed out by the relief party, and that another volunteer managed to get the word through. Both Mac Eoin and Ó Brádaigh name Vahey and also relate that he was an uncle of Frank Stagg. Ó Brádaigh also relates that Pádraic Feeney's sister, Christina, was later to marry Tom Maguire, in December 1924, while he was still on the run from Irish Free State forces.
18. A commemorative monument was erected to Feeney just west of Hewitt's Hotel, which is now the property of T.J. O'Toole. It is generally accepted locally that Feeney was taken out of Hewitt's, told to run for it and then 'shot while escaping arrest'.

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