

The Tourmakeady Ambush, May 1921 – Part II

Seán Ó hÓgáin

One of the most colourful engagements of the War of Independence took place on the western side of Lough Mask in Co. Mayo. The first part of this two-part article appeared in issue No. 22, 2002, of the Society's Journal.

In the Officers' Mess of the Military Barracks in Ballinrobe, where 'C' Company, 2nd Battalion of the Border Regiment was quartered, mention was made of some firing during that morning from the direction of Lough Mask (Ibberson, 1955).¹⁹ At 13.45 hours a message arrived telling of the ambush. The O.C. of 'C' Company was Lieutenant Geofferey Ibberson, and after consultation with a superior, it was agreed that he should take action with his personnel.²⁰ As he had a good general knowledge of the area and the ground, Ibberson drew up a plan.²¹ He figured the Sinn Féiners were most likely to make their getaway from Tourmakeady in a westerly direction into the Partry mountains, thus avoiding Derrypark police station and Srah. The transport available consisted of two Crossley Tenders and a three-ton lorry.²² There were two officers, Lieutenants Smith and Craig, available for duty. Ibberson directed that the two Crossleys, the first commanded by Smith and the second commanded by himself, were to move via Srah and to halt a half-mile beyond Tourmakeady. These two patrols were then to move, at 300 yard intervals, west up the Partry mountains. Upon reaching the summit they were to wheel right in a northerly direction and inwards toward the party from the three-ton lorry. All ranks were issued with rifles and bandoliers.

Lieutenant Craig was to lead the three-ton directly to Srah. This party consisted of approximately twenty soldiers and they were armed with two Lewis guns. The plan was for them to move in a westerly direction up to the Gortbunacullin area and then to wheel south and try to contact the patrols from the Crossleys in a limited pincer movement in the area of most likely retreat for the Sinn Féiners. As Smith and Craig mustered the troops, Ibberson hurried to Ballinrobe Post Office to dispatch telegrams. It was here that news of the ambush had been received over the phone from Tourmakeady, indicating that the lines had not been cut. He dispatched telegrams to O.C., Military Barracks, Castlebar and Westport.²³ At 14.30 the patrols set off for Tourmakeady. Near Srah bridge Ibberson's Crossley had a puncture, which was speedily changed. He mentions the heat of the day, and that the scent of the gorse at the site of the breakdown

was intoxicating (Ibberson, 1955). The Crossleys halted in Tourmakeady for information. They met Captain Poccocke, District Inspector of the RIC in Ballinrobe. Poccocke had arrived before them but had no idea in which direction the Sinn Féiners had withdrawn. Ibberson decided to continue with his plan. He also speaks of seeing the bodies of constables with whom he had worked and whom he respected, and mentions being filled with feelings of vengeance. He says that four had been killed and two wounded.²⁴ After debussing and ordering the drivers to report back to Captain Poccocke, Smith and Ibberson led their patrols west towards the mountains, with Smith forward 300 yards. Ibberson passed through the southern part of Tourmakeady Lodge Estate, and as he had found and arrested Sinn Féiners hiding in similar places before, he extended the patrol into the thick woods, with his sergeant on his left. Once out of the woods he observed Smith's patrol ahead and beginning to climb the bare hills. However, only two men were with him. He sounded the rally on his whistle and fired twice in the air to attract the attention of the rest of his patrol, but with no response. Anxious that he was losing touch with Smith's patrol, the three of them advanced, but they saw a man leading a farm cart about 400 yards to the left, and decided to search it. Shouts failing to stop the cart, they fired a couple of shots across its bows, and the cart stopped. The cart contained only a little girl who was frightened and whom they tried to comfort for a few moments.

Ibberson found the day unusually hot, and after climbing some distance the three of them took off their jackets and puttees and slung their two bandoliers over their shoulders, with Ibberson placing his .32 automatic pistol in his 'right-hand breeches pocket' (Ibberson, 1955).²⁵ On reaching the summit they were unable to locate Smith's patrol.²⁶ They turned right and north, near the mountain crest. The ground was bare and boggy in parts. After advancing a short distance in this direction a group of four men appeared moving west, to Ibberson's left, and carrying weapons. Ibberson and his two-man patrol found a firing position, and opened fire with 300 yards in their sights. The four men, who had previously not seen the patrol, immediately vanished from view. The Englishman and his companions pushed on to the position where they had sighted the armed men, and found it to be a gully along a crest, with a view to the north and east, i.e. down to the lake and also the Srah-Tourmakeady road.

As they observed the terrain they noticed the four men scampering away north across another gully. Gazing to the north-east Ibberson could also see, below and in front of him, a large number of men who appeared to be in four groups, in single file, and in flight.²⁷

Soon after Pat Kennedy and his party had seen the soldiers going up the mountain, Tom Maguire and his men came under heavy and accurate fire from

rifles and machine-guns. Lewis guns began to find the range as they cut up the heather and scraws of earth; then when the gun bursts were observed British officers gave the range to their riflemen. The fire was so heavy that the volunteers' coats were covered by bog mould, thrown up by bullets ploughing into the mountain in front of them. It was a fine May day but to the waiting men it meant that sunset, which in the West is an hour later, would not creep down until close on half past ten. If the Column could hold out until then, the men would have a good chance to get through in the sheltering darkness, but the hours in between would be long. The rock sloped behind them and gave them cover, but in front Lewis guns cut away the torn earth and fire crept in gradually until it reached the extended Column position. It would seem that the British hoped to solve the problem of making the Column surrender by an intensification of rifle and machine-gun fire directed now from scattered groups of soldiers on the mountainside, who had closed in. Terrified by the sounds of battle and by the unusual movement, cattle and horses rushed through the heather and hares darted out of cover. The real danger, however, would come from 1,500 to 2,000 yards away. Bullets from these ranges would drop down at forty-five degrees and could then search out the defended position from on high.

The leader of the Column was in a controlling position apart from the groups and Ibberson easily picked him out. The Column was on open hillside and was moving towards Gortbunacullin, where Ibberson had directed Lieutenant Craig and his Lewis guns. The column changed direction to the north-west, and Ibberson realised the men would escape over the mountains towards Bohaun unless his patrol reached a position above their line of advance, to force them back in the direction of the position of the Lewis guns. Ibberson considered the matter urgent, for though his patrol had been gaining pace, he estimated the Column was then 600 yards ahead of him but down the hillside. Realising that the two men in his patrol were unable to keep up the necessary pace to head off the Column, Ibberson ordered them to follow as fast as they could, and he took off at a fast pace across Drumcogy Mountain. He ran about a mile to reach a point where he was able to overlook the Sinn Féin Column (Ibberson, 1955).

From this position Ibberson fired three or four rounds at the leader of the Column. He fell on the slope facing Ibberson, while the rest of the Column took cover. Tom Maguire was hit and badly wounded in several places by a burst from a Lewis gun, and from the pain in his upper arm he knew that the bone was broken and he was bleeding dangerously. He lay on his uninjured side while Michael O'Brien crawled to his assistance from his end of the line to apply tourniquet and bandages. O'Brien knelt beside him, eased the jacket off the injured limb and ripped up the shirtsleeve to expose the wound. Then he tried to staunch the blood by pressing on arteries and by binding the arm tightly with a bandage

from his first aid kit. As O'Brien crouched beside Maguire his back was towards the enemy rifle fire. Ibberson fired one round at him before realizing he [O'Brien] had come to assist the wounded Maguire. As Ibberson looked round vainly for his patrol a few bullets fell near him. The shots appeared to come from the four men he had previously chased. As he took cover, however, he heard a Lewis gun open up from the direction of Gortbunacullin and saw bullet strikes above the Column's position. Ibberson signalled to the Borders and soon after all firing ceased.

Seeing no movement from the Column and fearing they might be withdrawing east and down the hillside, Ibberson made a right flank movement to the south, crawling the last few yards. On arrival at a viewpoint he saw about a dozen men in a small saucer of ground twenty yards from his position. Ibberson observed a man attending the wounded Maguire, but as he looked to his rifle he found the magazine empty. As quietly as possible he charged five rounds and then, somewhat nervously, added another three from another charger. He then decided to bluff the Column into surrender in the vain hope of disarming them and marching them to Gortbunacullin, and jumped forward shouting 'Come My Borders. Hands Up, Surrender.'

Suddenly Maguire, who was now lying flat on his back, became aware of a tall, bareheaded man in his shirtsleeves a short distance away. He was carrying a rifle. By his build Maguire took him to be Costello, an ex-soldier from Tournawoad. Costello had served through the world war in the Irish Guards and had been wounded. 'Costello is coming up now,' the Commander thought, 'because he knows we are in trouble.' A good shot and a man who had seen arduous service, he would be of immense help to the Column. The Commander saw his mistake when it was too late. Behind the tall figure he now noticed eight khaki soldiers with rifles, who had suddenly rushed forward from behind a low ridge of ground.

'Look out, lads, look out!' he shouted excitedly.

'Hands up, boys!' called out the tall man as he brought up his rifle towards his shoulder.

O'Brien, when he heard his Commander's cry of alarm, was pressing tightly on a bandage, concerned about the spurts of blood, which had raddled his hands and seeped on to the ground. He grabbed his rifle and turned quickly towards the new menace. Maguire watched in helpless anxiety. Both men had their rifles in a firing position and, for what seemed a long time to the wounded officer, they faced each other as if time had suddenly stood still. Some of the hurrying soldiers

had stopped and were fumbling with their weapons. Then there was a sharp rifle crack and O'Brien slumped heavily across Máguire's legs. To the right of the Commander a shotgun man replied. His buckshot struck the stranger and knocked the rifle from his grip. Shotgun men on the left used their weapons as the soldiers ran back with their leader towards cover and safety. Some of them dropped into the heather, wounded as they retreated. O'Brien lay where he had fallen. Men crawled up to him and lifted his weight off their Commander's legs, but when they turned him upwards he was dead.

Ibberson says that when he surprised the Column he saw several put up their hands but the man who was attending to the wounded leader picked up his rifle and had a snap shot at him. At this Ibberson dropped and the shot missed, but he shot the Column man who then rolled over. Ibberson rose again and was about to repeat the order when he was shot from the left through both arms and in the chest. As he was wounded Ibberson turned and set off down the hillside. After about twenty yards a bullet struck his left thigh, causing him to trip and fall, amongst another group of Sinn Féiners, who were flat on the ground. He scrambled up and had to pick his way among them as they were so close together. Ibberson recalled how he was fortunate that he was being shot at, or that the men whom he fell among thought the position was being overrun by British soldiers, as he got clear and ran zigzag down the hillside for about a mile until he came to some stone walls. As he ran he could hear the Lewis guns opening fire again. His useless arms and hands made the stone walls difficult to cross, and twice he had to take a running jump, land on his middle and roll over. Eventually he reached a boreen, which ran north to south, parallel to the Srah-Tourmakeady road. On the way down the hillside Ibberson reckoned he had seen Craig's lorry beside the road, south of Srah. He turned left in the lane to make for it, but found himself near to collapse.

He approached a farm cottage on the right of the lane, which had a jaunting car in the yard and a horse tied up. As he entered the cottage a scowling youth ran out (Ibberson, 1955). There was an elderly couple inside and he ordered the old man to harness up and take him to the main road in the car. As the old man argued that the mare had only recently foaled and was unfit for harness, Ibberson had to sit down and he describes it as his most frustrating experience of the day, made all the worse by the fact that his automatic was in his pocket, but he was unable to remove it to threaten the old man.²⁸ Ibberson managed finally to persuade the old man, and they set off in the jaunting car for the road beside the lake. Ibberson reckoned the cottage was almost half a mile due west of Drumcoggy Lodge. After journeying 500 yards further north along the lane, Ibberson asked the driver to stop at a cottage on the west side of the lane.²⁹ They eventually made their way to the lorry, which indeed proved to be Craig's party.³⁰

Ibberson was taken to Ballinrobe, where an officer friend, from the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders, helped him from the lorry.³¹ This regiment had arrived from Claremorris for the drive the next morning.³² He spent the night in barracks with a shot near the heart causing concern to Doctor Daly who visited him often. His batman spent the night with him and Archdeacon Traynor also spent some time with him. The following morning, escorted by his batman, Ibberson made the train journey to King George V Hospital in Dublin. Here he was operated on and subsequently made a full recovery.³³

Two experienced Column leaders were out of the fight. The Commander was an additional burden as he was bleeding profusely, and if his men could hold out until dusk, he would have to be carried off the mountain. Ammunition was becoming scarce. Fire had to be directed only at movement and against Lewis gun positions. Shotgun men waited for the inevitable charge but the riflemen were learning to squeeze their triggers, as they had been ordered, only when they felt sure that they could hit a khaki figure. Previously the British had advanced under concentrated fire but they had run back again when a few good shots in the Column flattened out some of their number.

The Column Commander had been wounded several times and the day for him slowly filtered out its light. Although his men bandaged him as best they knew, Maguire had lost a good deal of blood, and the wounds and anxiety were wearing him between dual millstones for, unlike the British, each IRA unit had to continue its resistance by itself. That was a burden, which often weighed heavily on a senior officer or column commander. If he worked out an action he was responsible for its success, and if it was drawn out in time he might have to meet British reinforcements which would attempt to support an endangered barracks or a convoy threatened on the road. Unexpected sequels to a deliberate attack had to be provided for in his planning. If the fight was prolonged he could not hope to receive help, either in men or munitions. As well, he would feel responsible for losses in action and for whatever reprisals the enemy might take against the lives of people in the area, or against their property. As the British tested out their ring squeeze he would find that some of the shotguns, probably worn thin by rust and lack of care, had burst their barrels when the buckshot of refilled cartridges tried to rattle down their sides (O'Malley, 1982).

Gradually the British came as close as they could find cover; at intervals heavy fire was directed at the Column position, both from near at hand and from far away. The British could afford to wait. They had ample ammunition and could rely on fresh men to reinforce them. The Column men had intended to get food and water at Srah that morning, but while they were on their way to that village their Commander had first sighted the enemy lorries, and his men had withdrawn up the hill again, without provisions. In the evening they were very

thirsty from their hurried climb and from the excitement of action. They had neither food nor water and their wounded Commander suffered badly from thirst.

Reports had gone regularly into Ballinrobe, which was now a minor expeditionary headquarters, about the day's work on the mountainside. IRA prisoners in the military barracks had heard the soldiers there discuss the situation. The last report was that the rebels on the mountain were completely surrounded and it was now just a question of time before they surrendered.

The men waited on the hills anxiously until the long twilight slowly settled down over the rise and on the bright surface of Lough Mask. Then, in a blaze of colour, slowly adjusting itself as if painting a series of tone relationships to be seen only in the West, the sun dropped over the edge of the height.³⁴ In the darkness the men could see Very lights from scattered British positions shoot up into the night sky to outline the countryside as a red-blue blaze in the strange unreality of their dramatic light. They heard whistles shrilling, then lorries started up on the roads and it would seem, from the noise that their engines made in the quiet evening, and their spaced headlights as they moved along, that the enveloping forces on this side of the mountain were returning to the shelter of their barracks. The dead and wounded British were carried down the mountainside, and as there was an anxiety to conceal casualties the wounded were sent on to Claremorris in carriages with the blinds drawn down. The British left picquets behind them on the lower slopes to guard the ground until daylight, but the fear of hill darkness and a night swoop by the hill men kept the skeleton force so strictly on the defensive that there was no difficulty for the Column men moving through them in the dark.

Tom Maguire was carried on the back of a comrade to the nearest house. The men who were carrying the body of Michael O'Brien lost their way and had to leave the body behind, where it was found the next day by the soldiers.

A message was sent to Dr Murphy in Hewitt's Hotel, and he came to attend the wounded man, but could bring no instruments or medical supplies for fear of exciting suspicion. He set the broken arm, using pieces of board from a box, strips of whatever suitable cloth he could find and broken wood for wadding.

Escape

Maguire had already advised some of his men to make their way beyond the western cliff surround of Buckaun. They could then skirt the narrower out-thrust above Skeltach, and on the heights of Maamtrasna, over seven miles away,

they could follow down towards Lough Nafuoey and along by the Finny river to Finny. The men did not know the sharp cliff edges of this journey and there were now no guides left to help them, but their sense of direction and the clarity of danger brought them safely across country that would daunt most men in daylight, to the lowlands near Finny.

At midnight the Column Commander was slowly carried downhill. He was carried upon one fellow's back, his arms hanging down. The jolting movement of descent and the insecurity of footing in the darkness made progress difficult, but the bearers were anxious to spare him unnecessary pain. The first house they came to was Lally's and there they decided against taking him any further. He was brought in and laid down, and felt very comfortable, but very weak. Some of his men had now to get back to their own countryside, although reluctant to leave him behind. They went towards the eastern edge of Lough Mask, round by the water close to Ballinrobe, and they made their way some miles below that town to the security of the Neale. Bourke, a Column man who had been slightly wounded in the thigh, crossed the mountains with a few companions to the western slopes and by the morning's light he had reached the friendly houses of Clady, about nine miles from Westport. There he was helped on his way with a horse, which would take him further from the wide encircling movement to be expected that day. At dawn on the morning following the fight the local men came to Lally's with the intention of carrying Maguire away from danger, but they were unable to help him. He was so weak that he could not put weight on his feet.³⁵ During the night Dr Murphy had come out from Tourmakeady to attend him.³⁶

With the morning light, troops emerged from the comfort of their barracks. Extra reinforcements had made the proposed day's work easier and the full resources of military equipment, from field-kitchens to aeroplanes, were released for this charade of a minor war. Houses were systematically searched and the occupants laboriously questioned in a ponderous manner, but evasion and astute anticipation of the ambiguous nature of questions were bred too deeply in the bone, so that the people hermetically sealed off whatever information they knew in pretence of innocent unawareness.

As the soldiers moved upwards they came close to Lally's house. The women, who had observed the military movements from their first dust swirl, carried out the wounded Column Commander towards the bed of a dried-up mountain stream where he lay under the shelter of overhanging whins. His bloodstained bedclothes were placed under him in the stony roughness of the streambed and there he stayed until twilight put an end to military mountaineering.

Next day (Wednesday) the patient was carried out of the house and put

lying on straw, in the dry bed of a stream under some overhanging bushes. That night he was taken to another house, further north on the mountain. At nightfall he was carried down the mountain to another house where he had to remain because of the increasing seriousness of his wounds. IRA men who remained in the area came in with the news that the British were approaching the house where he lay in bed. Again the women helped, this time by carrying him on slings made of their shawls. As they hurried upwards, stumbling under their burden, Maguire heard the clear engine-sound of an aeroplane, which was directing troop movements. He told his bearers to set him down at once and to seat themselves on the ground. They covered him with their shawls so that the aeroplane noised overhead of a group of women who were having a good chat.

The next day, Thursday and a Holy day, he was placed in a hollow on top of a sharp hillock. It rained all day, and during the day he heard soldiers passing underneath on the mountain.³⁷ News about the Column and the local IRA, stories about searches and interrogations, came in regularly to the Commander. Women, girls and children got through the British outposts and returned with information and with a well-seasoned curry of neighbourhood talk. He was hidden in the open again on Friday and Saturday.³⁸ On Saturday night, volunteers took him on an improvised stretcher across country to Ballintubber, and to the house of a herd named O'Toole, on the estate of James Fitzgerald Kenny of Clogher.³⁹ Next night he was brought to the home of Jerry Cochrane in Castlecarrá.⁴⁰

On the Tuesday night, a week after he was wounded, Dr Boyle from Balla came to attend him. The wounds, which by now were in a bad way, were cleaned and dressed. After a few nights the doctor returned with a support for the wounded arm.⁴¹ Part of it was a bread grater, and part of it a sort of iron elbow the doctor had made at the forge. It worked well, and with the help of his sister, who had come to nurse him, the C.C. was soon past the danger point and on the mend.⁴²

Other Columns

On the evening of the fight a message detailing the plight of the South Mayo Column was brought to Michael Kilroy, Brigadier of West Mayo. He was then in the valley between Bengorm and Buckoogh, near to the salmon leap at the foot of Lough Feeagh on the northern side of Clew Bay. The Newport Column men were with him, waiting for more definite information about British movement on the Mulranny road before they got ready to prepare an ambush position at the winding curve beside Burrishoole bridge. Kilroy told them that the South Mayo Column was hemmed in on the eastern slopes of the Partry mountains and that he intended to go at once to its aid, but as men would have to go outside the Brigade area he must first ask for volunteers. All the men present, he found, were willing

to go with him. Most of them carried rifles. They waited until the light began to fail, then left the shelter of the mountains in the soft freshness of the May night. They moved eastwards by Newport and by unfrequented ways until they crossed the main road between Castlebar and Newport. Broken hills led them onwards until they reached the district around Aghagower, which was also a core of safety and discretion. Their way wound on through bare heights towards the further mountains, in which the South Mayo Column was hemmed. Dawn came early, around four o'clock, and as the light slanted softly into the valleys of the Partry mountains the Column had to end its long march. At a house where they halted for information, Kilroy was told that the encircled South Mayo men had got through the enemy lines in darkness.

That same day the Westport Column had been lying out in ambush on the Ballinrobe road some miles beyond Westport, hidden in a tangle of scrub. In the early evening, tired from the disappointment of not finding any sign of British movement on the roadway, the men had moved out of their position when their Commander received a despatch. It brought news of Maguire's men on the distant heights. The Westport men went quickly towards the hills, hoping that they would be able to engage some of the British outposts to draw their attention away from the distressed Column. They had come as far as Derrycroff river, which runs below the Partry mountains, when they found that they, too, were not in time to assist in the breakout.

For four days the British combed the mountains for the numerous IRA dead whom they boasted they had killed, but particularly for the wounded who should have been hemmed in by their outpost lines.⁴³ Constabulary men with their steadily accumulated knowledge of the hills guided each khaki column. The young men and the middling young were missing from their villages whether they were members of the IRA or not. In the mountain area the heights were but stepping stones to their strong leg muscles which were accustomed to spend the day tracking down the cattle and contending with the climbing propensities of the wandering sheep. These men knew that raiding parties would interrogate them, and if they were of an active age they would be suspects to the military, Auxiliaries and Tans, who would not accept their ignorance of the previous fight. They would be presumed guilty, as aiders and abettors. That implication of connivance would mean variations on themes of manhandling, from rifle butts through heavy boots to fists or even to shots as threat or intention.

Two young men were found the morning following the retreat, near Glenmask, exhausted and asleep beside their shotguns. The military awakened them by the use of heavy boots. They had been searching the heights for foxes, the men said, which killed the young lambs whenever they found them isolated

during the lambing season. The explanation cut little ice with the soldiers who beat them unmercifully with rifle butts, again and again, and laid into them with their heavy boots, while the two wove their stories around the ravenous foxes. On their way to Ballina they were again given the close-quarter attention of their captors, so that on arrival they were a bloodied mass. An RIC man who had served in Tourmakeady confirmed that the men of the district did lie out to get the fox. The British had decided that possession of arms in the vicinity was sufficient to implicate these men in the deaths of the police and British military, but the explanation of the RIC man saved their lives.

A troop train which ran a pilot engine in front of it to test the railway line for loose rails or a land mine was sent on to Recess in Connemara. Troops searched the mountains on either side of the Maam valley and across by the pass which led to the enclosed shelter of Lough Nafooy. The prowling eye of the aeroplanes helped the ground forces in this difficult country, but their quarry, the Column, which had confronted the mixed force on the mountain, seemed to have vanished like mountain mist. On the troops' way back, the Twelve Pins were investigated on foot.

The only result of this careful combing of a mountain district was a tired-foot impression of rugged scenery, the capture of two unmounted hunters, and the finding of the body of Michael O'Brien, which was to have been removed by the local Volunteers the night he had been killed.⁴⁴

Pádraic Feeney's body was placed in front of the main altar of the church in Ballinrobe. The RIC dead rested before the side altars of the same church. When the British protested against the place of honour being given to a rebel, the Canon refused to make any alteration in the distribution of the dead. Daily papers, however, announced the following: 'The Archbishop of Tuam and Canon Dalton, PP, called at Ballinrobe barracks and expressed their deep sympathy with the police, describing the victims as men of excellent character.'

Effect

Following the ambush at Tourmakeady the Royal Irish in the isolated posts of Derrypark and Kinury were withdrawn at once for their own safety and to strengthen the constabulary posts in Ballinrobe and Castlebar.⁴⁵ Thus, as a result of the ambush, another large stretch of mountain area was freed from continuous constabulary espionage and from immediate constabulary contact with civilian sources of information. On the other hand, IRA columns had an added portion of difficult country to use as a retreat in emergency. Constabulary usefulness was now limited to the identification of prisoners, to the tutoring of

Tans in local knowledge, and the guidance of raiding parties who rarely sallied forth except in considerable strength. The reprisals carried out in the form of burning local houses in Tourmakeady and Cross only served to further alienate the local population from British army and police force.⁴⁶

The enemy had to use additional men for patrols and for convoys, and this increase, when multiplied by the demand for more troops in other centres of unease throughout the country, fixed the strain on imperial defence at too tense a breaking-point. In this way, a minor operation contributed to the sum total of influence which made it impossible for the British to rule the country by force.

The chief protagonists in battle were also to feature again. Ibberson was decorated for his heroism on the day, single-handedly taking two volunteer leaders out of battle, one permanently. Maguire was selected as a candidate in the general election of May 1921 while he was lying wounded out on the hillside.⁴⁷ He was to go on to play a leading role in the Civil War and the republican movement.⁴⁸

Notes

19. Ibberson wrote an account of the ambush which is filed as a manuscript with the Royal Irish Academy. A handwritten note explains that the account is given to the RIA to relieve the executors of his will sending the manuscript to the RIA after his death. It was written in 1956 at the instigation of Mr J.R.W. Goulden, who was a son of one of the members of the RIC stationed in Ballinrobe in 1921. As a result of two accounts of the ambush published in the early fifties, Ibberson, at Goulden's prompting, decided to give his own account.

In the preamble to this account, Ibberson makes the point that a copy of a document from O.C. Mayo South had come into the possession of 5th Division. This report to I.R.A. Headquarters, dated 4/6/1921, which may be Maguire's written report, and the basis of O'Malley's account, comes in for particular refutation in Ibberson's manuscript. However, it is interesting to note that Ibberson declares that 'this report tied with my own in the matter of actual contact, but the extravagant claims made were a source of amusement to us at the time knowing, as we did, that apart from the RIC, I was the only casualty inflicted that day by the Column commanded by O.C. Mayo South.'

The preamble goes on to state that Ibberson was later asked to help Maguire by Maguire's father. 'When my future father-in-law, Mr F.J.S. Tunly of Lisloughry, Cong (he was Lord Iveagh's agent for Ashford Estate) wrote to me saying that Tom Maguire's old father had been to see him about his son and could I (Ibberson) help, I had little hesitation in doing so.' He also speaks of a 'strange sympathetic understanding between men who fight one another – not illogical, I suppose, when we come to think of it. Many boys at school are enemies until they fight it out' (Ibberson, 1955).

20. In his account of the ambush, Ibberson makes reference to the fact that Chatfield had been wounded and that consequently he was commanding. The Brigade was to carry out a drive (a phrase also used by Maguire when talking to Mac Eoin), which was an attempt to round up Sinn Féiners. As a result, A Company, Borders, then commanded by Major Munby, had arrived from Castlebar in Ballinrobe Barracks to take part in the drive in North Galway, starting in the early hours of 4 May. According to Ibberson, 'As Tourmakeady was [in his] area of responsibility, Munby agreed that I should take action with C company personnel' (Ibberson, 1955).
21. Ibberson had selected a dozen soldiers and had exercised them in hill climbing above Derrypark and above Gortbunacullin (Ibberson, 1955).

22. Each Crossley was able to carry nine personnel besides the driver. The three-ton lorry was able to accommodate twenty to twenty-five (Ibberson, 1955).
23. The text of the telegrams were:
- (a) To O.C., Military Barracks, Castlebar.
 Hellfire Tourmakeady AAA Ballinrobe Srah Tourmakeady AAA Castlebar Killavally
 Bohaun Bohaun Ravine Tourmakeady AAA
 From: Military Ballinrobe.
 Hellfire = Ambush
 Ballinrobe Srah Tourmakeady route which the military were taking to the scene of the ambush.
 Castlebar Killavally Bohaun Bohaun Ravine Tourmakeady = the route by which the recipients of the telegram should proceed to the scene of the ambush.
- (b) To: O.C., R.I.C. Barracks Westport.
 Hellfire Tourmakeady AAA Ballinrobe Srah Tourmakeady AAA Westport Winding
 Valley Tourmakeady AAA
 From: Military Ballinrobe.
- Ibberson also talks about the fact that 'it might seem presumptuous that I, a subaltern, should give directions to my CO at Castlebar . . . however . . . the first to receive information about the enemy should carry out such procedure' (Ibberson, 1955).
24. The dead were named as Sergt. Gregan and Constables O'Regan, Oaks and Flynn (*Freemans Journal*, 6 May 1921).
25. 'The sun was unusually hot so after climbing some distance we three took off our jackets and puttees and slung our two bandoliers over our shoulders. The military uniforms of those days were a handicap to free movement' (Ibberson, 1955). This action was to prove fateful for Maguire's judgement and O'Brien's life.
26. Smith's patrol sighted two Sinn Féiners and chased and captured them in the Winding Valley, one in possession of a shotgun (Ibberson, 1955).
27. Ibberson says that 'At first they appeared to be rather a rabble, but eventually they adopted some formation . . . At the time I estimated that the total number was about sixty, but it is easy to exaggerate in such circumstances and forty was probably nearer the correct figure' (Ibberson, 1955).
28. 'The old woman who thought and said I was dying, knelt beside me and prayed for my soul to the Virgin.' The old lady later helped him into the car 'always awkward affairs for the unathletic . . . I hope that I adequately expressed my thanks.' He was understanding toward the old couple. 'These old folk were in a difficult position. To help me was likely to prove unpopular with Sinn Féin and for me to die on their hands would be equally unpopular with the Military. I think it was the old woman who influenced the man to take me' (Ibberson, 1955).
29. Ibberson comments that 'there were some people at the door of the cottage whom I asked for a drink, but this was refused' (Ibberson, 1955).
30. Ibberson speaks of the 'strong arms of the Sergeant in charge of the lorry, who helped me down from the car, were an enormous comfort'. He notes that a soldier and a Lewis gun were in position near the roadside and he says he 'was disappointed at seeing this as it would have been of greater service up at Gortunacullin'. He told the Sergeant to take him to Tourmakeady 'so that I could report on the enemy's position. He however, fearful of my life, insisted on taking me to Barracks at once. Cold by now, they wrapped me in a blanket and we drove to Barracks with all speed' (Ibberson, 1955).
31. Ibberson had fought in the war with this officer, whom he does not name, in the Royal Air Force (Ibberson, 1955).
32. Ibberson was still insisting that information should be sent to Tourmakeady as to the whereabouts of the Column. He also hoped that troops could be sent out from Ballinrobe to reinforce Craig. 'All this would have been easy but for the drive due to begin in a matter of nine hours' (Ibberson, 1955).

33. Ibberson was under the care of Sir William Taylor, the famous surgeon. 'A swan slug was removed from my chest and later the ulnar nerve, left arm, was sutured with unusual success for those days. The wound in the left thigh, which had just missed the femoral artery, left no permanent damage nor did the four shots which passed through the right arm' (Ibberson, 1955).
34. One of the joys of Irish history are the writings of Ernie O'Malley. Here is a purple patch which interrupts the IRA Volunteers' long stretch on the Partry mountains. 'Below them they could see the shores of Lough Carra with the light green sheen on its waters, the oak trees around Moore Hall and the tiny islands of Lough Mask standing away from serrated lake edges. The peninsula between the two waters stood out clearly with its steep western end, and below it were the many islands in the Corrib until it narrowed on the way to Galway. Men could pick out their homes far below or guess at their location with the aid of well-known landmarks. Around them on the mountains were the British forces together with that old historical tradition of Irish mercenaries, who now in their bottle-green uniforms helped to guide the troops and later would identify the prisoners and the dead' (O'Malley, 1982). For those who have not read any of his books, there is a treasure in store.
35. 'I had never taken spirits before, but that morning I was given a double egg-flip mixed with whiskey and it did me a power of good. Leaning heavily upon both of them (two Volunteers), I left the house and moved towards the end of the gable. Rounding it, there came a puff of wind, which flattened me. My legs buckled and I could travel no farther' (Mac Eoin, 1980).
36. 'At that time there was a doctor in Tourmakeady village who had informed our lads that if ever he was needed he could be called upon. A message was conveyed to him by some youngster, and he came at once, but of course he could bring nothing with him. He rummaged around the house, picking up a few scalpels of wood, and some bits of wool, and a clean flour bag. With this he improvised the necessary splints and bandages' (Mac Eoin, 1980).
37. 'They had scarcely gone when it commenced to pour rain. In a short while I was soaked through. I don't know if you have ever lain soaked through but if it is not too cold it can almost be a pleasurable experience' (Mac Eoin, 1980).
38. 'I was inside that cordon from the Tuesday until the Saturday night' (Mac Eoin, 1980).
39. 'They got me out on the Saturday night. They took me across country into the Ballyglass area, between Ballinrobe and Balla; and of all the places they were heading for it was to the herd's house on the Fitzgerald-Kenny estate' (Mac Eoin, 1980).
40. 'I was moved again that night, eventually reaching a place called Castlecarra, a very out of the way place, to the house of a man called Terry Cochran. Terry, although of Irish extraction, was born in Glasgow, and had a very Scottish accent (Mac Eoin, 1980).
41. 'In Balla there was a Doctor O'Boyle, who had been in the army during the War. He came readily. Sitting on the end of the bed he cleansed the wounds, no anaesthetic, no half brandy or any nonsense like that. He was about three hours at it, but he did a great job. When he was going, one of our lads whispered, "What do you think of him?" "He is finished, he has lost too much blood. If you could get him into a hospital he would have some chance, but here! . . ." And he glanced around eloquently. The following week he [the doctor] came out again. "Well, what do you think of him now?" "He will be fighting fit in a few weeks," he replied cheerfully' (Mac Eoin, 1980).
42. 'Our home here at Cross had been wrecked by the police and the British Army. They came on a number of occasions carrying out punitive raids as they call them now in the North. They would start up a fire inside, but on three different occasions the neighbours entered quickly and put it out. Then one day they came and did a real job; they demolished the house, the house in which we now sit. We had to rebuild it completely. I can tell you that it was not easy doing that after the Civil War when our business was in ruins' (Mac Eoin, 1980).
43. 'The other lieutenant's party opened fire on the retreating rebels from another direction with a machine-gun, and eight men were seen to fall. Owing to the distance from their base and the

smallness of the party, the pursuit was then abandoned' (*The Freemans Journal*, Friday 6 May 1921).

44. 'Crown forces searching Partry mountains found the dead body of an unknown rebel, wearing a Sam Browne belt. Also found 22 Shotguns, 3 German rifles, 15 Service rifles, 2 Webley revolvers and a large quantity of ammunition. The service rifle and one of the two revolvers belonged to Sgt. Gregan, killed in the ambush' (*Freemans Journal*, Friday 6 May, 1921).
45. Ibberson comments that 'some success, however, was achieved. The next day – 4 May – a party of police under Mr Goulden's father searched the area of the fighting and collected the following weapons left by the Sinn Féin Column: Seven German Rifles near to the body of Brigade Adjutant Michael O'Brien, ~~Twenty~~ assorted shotguns, One rifle and one revolver which had been captured in the ambush from Sergeant Regan (*sic*) who was killed. Secondly, the Sinn Féin Column never fought again' (Ibberson, 1955).
46. 'Given to Flames. Co-operative stores and several houses burned. Reprisals have followed the recent ambush at Tourmakeady, in which several lives were lost. The local co-operative stores, Mr O'Toole's business premises, and the gate lodge near the scene of the attacks have been burned. The residence of a young man named Feeney was damaged by bombs' (*The Freemans Journal*, Wednesday 11 May 1921).
47. 'I had been selected as a candidate in the general election of May, 1921 while I was lying wounded out upon the hillside. I knew nothing about it at the time, but I was returned unopposed. My selection got over the difficulty of a number of possible candidates who were presenting themselves. Conor Maguire the barrister, was one and he had been a prospective candidate in 1918. He was popular. There was also Dick Walsh, Adjutant of the original Mayo Brigade. He had a Fenian background. There was a third, by the name of Coyne, a solicitor from Ballyhaunis. I do not know who proposed my name. Maguire and Walsh supported me then but Coyne put it to a vote. I thus became a member of the Second Dáil' (Mac Eoin, 1980).
48. Ibberson talks of having liked Maguire's father after he had made the request for help with Tom. He mentions that at one time Maguire snr. had helped to save his life. 'In consequence without the authority of my Commanding Officer (who might have found it difficult to give it), I wrote to General Mulcahy, then I think, at the Portobello Barracks, Dublin, and put in a good word for Maguire and asked him, Mulcahy, for an interview so that I could press the point. I received an acknowledgement of this letter but that was as far as it got. I never met Mulcahy' (Ibberson, 1955).

Correction to Notes, Part I: In Note 6, page 58 of *Cathair na Mart* issue No. 22, 2002, the name of a Volunteer is given as 'Martin Conroy.' He was, however, 'Máirtín Conway' of Gortnacaille, considered the best shot in the Column and one who remained faithful to his oath of allegiance 'to his dying day'. He was also the Column's only married man.

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Map of Tourmakeady ambush from Ernie O'Malley, Raids and Rallies, p 133.

(Courtesy of Avril Books, Limited, Dublin 1982).