

Town Hall Wrecked; Actors Assaulted; Police Inspector Has Jaw Broken; Police Baton Westport Citizens. These were some of the incidents which took place

BY
Anthony Lavelle

When "General John Regan" Visited Westport

Older people in Westport can remember a night in February, 1914 when the Riot Act was read in the Octagon, when police, armed with carbines and batons, charged rioting crowds of men who were trying to set carriages on fire. All the windows in one of the town's hotels were shattered and in the excitement the District Inspector of the R.I.C. had his jaw broken. It all ended when twenty men of the town were arrested and charged with causing a riot to the terror of loyal subjects of the Crown and with assaulting members of a play company and with assaulting and wounding District Inspector Neylon and other members of the Royal Irish Constabulary. After trial at the Mayo Criminal Sessions in Castlebar, the men, some of them leading merchants of the town, were bound to the peace.

The thing that caused it all was a play entitled "General John Regan" which was written by the local Rector, who was none other than the famous author, Rev. Canon James Hannay, better known under his nom-de-plume "George A. Bermingham." The play was produced in the Town Hall by a London Theatrical Company and when they came to a scene in which a priest was shown in an unfavourable light twenty men rose from the audience, jumped on to the stage, assaulted the actors and wrecked the hall. The other scenes followed.

But to begin at the beginning. The country as at peace under British rule, but various societies like the Gaelic League, the Irish Literary Society and Sinn Fein were trying to instil into the people a pride of nationhood; that they belonged to one of the oldest nations in the world and that they should take a pride in everything Irish; that they should not allow anybody to cast ridicule on an Irishman as the landlord class at the time were trying to do. They were also urged to fight for their freedom. A "stage-Irish" play was a touchy subject in the existing circumstances.

Touring Players

At that time the people found time for leisure and in the London off-season theatrical companies sometimes came to Ireland, where they did a tour of the halls of the country. Such a company was the Paynes-Siddon Company and the piece they selected to play in Westport was none other than Canon Hannay's play—"General John Regan." That the Company meant to do full justice to the play may be gleaned from the fact that they sent an artist to Westport to paint the street of Tubber Hill on one of the backcloths. This street was then a street of thatched houses and any little blemish which may have marred any of them was truly displayed by the artist. In the matter of costumes also the Company went to the limit, even going so far as to purchase rags of clothes worn by beggars on the streets in which to array those who were to take the parts of local characters.

The Roman Catholic Administrator of Westport at the time was Very Rev. Ml. Canon McDonnell, who, on reading the play and finding that he and other local people were insultingly caricatured in it, spoke from the pulpit and denounced the piece.

One of the scenes to which he took exception—and no wonder—showed a priest drinking whiskey out of a bottle and then staggering across the room and embracing his servant girl. In another scene the girl was shown frying something on a pan, then scratching her head and immediately afterwards putting her hands on the food which was supposed to be cooking. The play was stage-Irish at its best . . . or worst.

Crowded With Landed Gentry

The night of the performance ar-

rived at last. For hours the carriages and coaches of the landed gentry were arriving in the town. The streets were lined with vehicles, which had conveyed the "best people" for miles around to Westport for the big event—the staging of a play written by the local Rector.

When the curtain went up the hail was packed to capacity. The opening scene of the play went off all right, but when the scene portraying the priest came on those present saw something they had not bargained for. Immediately the scene opened twenty young men rushed on to the stage. Women in the audience screamed, and some of them fainted. The police were called in, but before they were on the spot and could take effective action "Gen. John Regan" was as dead as the famous Sir John Moore.

The men who went on the stage tore the clothes off the actors. They tore down the famous back cloth and smashed all the "properties" belonging to the Company and then, as if for good measure, pelted the actors with potatoes and chairs. Cries of "police" were heard above the screams of fashionable ladies, some of whom fainted at the thought of the Irish asserting themselves.

Police Action

Armed police entered the hall and cleared it, using their batons freely. There were struggles on the streets as police tried to prevent a crowd from setting fire to the carriages outside. In these clashes District Inspector Neylon, who was in charge of the police, had his jaw broken by a blow. The poor actors, who had no idea what it was all about, were smuggled to their hotel—now the Royal Hotel. The crowd followed them and smashed every window in the front of the hotel.

At length order was restored when twenty men were arrested. The men were brought before the Petty Session Court in Westport and charged by the Crown, at the prosecution of G. Hurst, District Inspector R.I.C. that "together with other evilly disposed persons, to the number of 12 and more, that they unlawfully and riotously assembled and gathered together to disturb the peace of Our Sovereign Lord, the King, and being so there and then assembled and gathered together did on the 4th day of February, 1914, attack, wound and otherwise ill-treat members of the Paynes-Siddon Theatrical Company and did damage the property of the said Company and further did at the same time unlawfully assault wound and ill-treat District Inspector Neylon and other members of the Royal Irish Constabulary to the great disturbance and terror of the liege subjects of Our Sovereign Lord the King and his laws to the evil example of others in the like offending."

All the men were bound over in their own personal bails of £30 each and two sureties of £15 each to keep the peace.

The Twenty

One of the men signed the bail bond in Irish "Cormac O'hAodha." He was the late Charley Hughes, founder of Charles Hughes Ltd., wholesale and retail drapers, Westport, and Irish Sewing Cotton Company and the Reliable Shoe Company, Westport. The others arrested were:

Thomas Hughes, Peter Street, Westport, labourer; Ml. Scott, Tubber Hill, labourer; John Cunnane, Bridge Street, shop assistant; Thomas Ralph, Altamount St., railway porter; Pat Cox, Castlebar St., labourer; Peter O'Malley, a former S.S.O. in Westport; Tim Foley, John's Road, labourer; Sean Malone, High St., coachbuilder, later chairman of Westport U.D.C.; El. Mulkerins, Fairgreen, do.; postman; Pat Kelly, Tubber Hill, postman; Andrew O'Malley, Westport Quay, labourer; Joseph Gill, Westport Quay, coal merchant; John Canon, Westport Quay, labourer; Ml. Grady, Westport

Quay, law clerk; John McGing, Westport Quay, labourer; Thomas and John Lambert, Westport Quay, labourers; John Hester and Jeremiah Cullinane, Westport Quay, labourers. Only Tim Foley, Ned Mulkerins, Tom Ralph and Tony Lambert are alive to-day.

Later malicious injury claims for large sums were obtained against the town of Westport but the citizens, even to-day, still say it was worth it all.

Press Re-Action

The press of the world gave scare headlines about the breaking up of the play and the English papers in particular brought charges of religious bigotry against the Catholics in the West of Ireland, forgetting of course, that the play itself was the cause of all the trouble.

On the other hand the riot at Westport made the author's name as a playwright and leading companies in England fought for the rights of the play, and in America the story was the same . . . play companies and publishers clamoured for the right to produce the book of the play and other works of Canon Hannay.

Canon Hannay was Rector in Westport from 1892 to 1914 and lived in the Rectory on the Newport Road. It is now owned by Mr. Trimmer, Manager of Irish Sewing Cotton Company, Westport.

Was Present

Mr. Ned Sammon, John's Row, Westport, who was present at the play told me that the hall was packed with people. The police were there also because they expected trouble. Everything went off all right until the "priest" and the "Servant Girl" came out on the stage. Then there was uproar. Somebody put out the lights. Chairs were flung to the stage and hit some of the actors.

Continuing, Mr. Sammon said: "A crowd of us young men jumped up on to the stage and started to pull the clothes off the actors, who fled out into the yard. It is now the yard of the New Cinema Theatre. We started to beat up the actors and one of the men was going to hit an actor on the head with a heavy shovel, but I took it from him. A blow of it would have killed the fellow. One of the men in charge of the play succeeded in getting away with the bag of money taken at the door. The police could not be sure who took part in the disturbance. Some of those who took part, like myself, were not arrested, and men who did not do anything were arrested."

Mr. Ned Mulkern, now retired from the Post Office, and living at the Fairgreen, Westport, said that he was arrested and charged although he did not take any part in the protest.

Mr. Arthur O'Malley, Shop St., Westport, a popular man, who has the history of Westport at his fingertips said he was not at the performance of the play, but he saw baton charges on the streets. The police barrack was in the premises which is now the Munster and Leinster Bank. The crowd broke most of the windows in Joyce's Hotel, now the Royal Hotel. They also smashed the windows of the shop owned by the late Bob Laing, in Bridge Street, because he was taking bookings for the show. The actors barricaded themselves in their hotel until they left by the first train the next morning.

And Still They Come

The Irish-American Alliance—an organisation formed in Westport, held a meeting and decided to stop the show. This protest was similar to the action taken by the people of Louisburgh last year when they refused to co-operate with a German Film Unit, which wanted the people to have animals in their houses and to have girls dressed in wellington boots and rags at a Ceili.

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G.A.A. Appeals Committee

At a meeting of the Mayo G.A.A. Board in Castlebar on Friday night the following Ap-

Mayo Delegates

The following delegates were appointed by the Mayo Co. G.A.A. Board at a meeting in

Western P.O. Clerks Censures N.E. and Officers

The Western Regional Action Committee of the Post Office Workers Union at a meeting in

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