

The Kilmeena ambush

BY MICHAEL MacEVILLY

Saturday last marked the 63rd anniversary of the Kilmeena Ambush in which five I.R.A. volunteers were killed and seven more injured in a shootout with 20 Black and Tans.

Castlebarman, Mr. Michael MacEvilly, nephew of staff Captain Seamus MacEvilly, who was one of the men killed in the encounter on May 19th, 1921, has carried out extensive research into the period.

Michael, from Station Road, Castlebar, takes a critical review of the ambush in an effort to give an accurate account of what happened on the ill-fated day.

He has been researching the activities of the West Mayo Brigade (later No. 1 Brigade, 4th Western Division) for the past four years, and would welcome any further documents, photographs, etc. which would be promptly copied and returned. He can be contacted at 18 Farnleigh Close, Stillorgan, Co. Dublin.

Although the Kilmeena ambush was the first major engagement between the West Mayo Brigade I.R.A. and the British forces in the area, little has been published on the subject, Canon Thomas Killeen (1891-1960), who was Parish Priest of Newport from 1948 to 1972, was one of the priests involved in the ambush and was to know afterwards many of the I.R.A. participants personally, including the column commander — Michael Kilroy (later Major General Michael Kilroy, O.C. Western Command I.R.A.) It would be expected therefore that any account written by him would significantly contribute to what is already known on the ambush. However, his account in the *Journal of the Westport Historical Society* (Vol. 2 No. 1) contains a number of inaccuracies which, if not corrected, will tend to be perpetuated.

The ambush occurred on Thursday, 19th May, 1921, and not on the previous day as stated in the article. This is confirmed by the date on the monument (see photograph on p.28 vol. 2 No. 1) erected in 1971 by a committee which included a number of participants.

The word 'police' is used somewhat ambiguously in his account to refer to the British forces involved. While it is not suggested that Canon Killeen deliberately adopted the official usage, it is important to be aware of the fact that British official statements always refer to the Black and Tans as 'police.' At this time "money could be obtained in England for police operations in Ireland but not on the military vote." Also, in an attempt to vilify the I.R.A., it was a deliberate part of British policy, "to make the war appear to be something it was not: a civil disturbance, a matter for the police." The fact that it was not just police who were involved but rather a mixed party of R.I.C. and Black and Tans is evidenced by various written accounts (unpublished) and also by the report on the death of Constable Beckett (see para. 8 below).

INCORRECT

The position of the vehicles at the start of the ambush and their make is incorrectly stated in the article. The British party, according to official sources, consisted of 20 men under District Inspector Donnellan and were being driven in a Ford car and two crossley tenders in the direction of Newport. Both Michael Kilroy and the Column Vice O.C. Ned Moane have stated in their own unpublished accounts that fire was opened on the leading lorry which broke through the ambush position. The remaining lorry and Ford car then halted near Fr. Conroy's house and the occupants commenced to return fire. Consequently, at no stage were three lorries outside Fr. Conroy's house.

It is incorrect to suggest that the absence of a guard on the bye-road "at the foot of the hill" was the main cause of the three I.R.A. deaths. There were three bye-roads leading East in the area of the ambush. The first (to the North) was behind the tailor O'Flynn's house and it led to Knocknabola village. The second was in the middle of the ambush position between the two hills, Knocknabola (to the North) and Clooneen (to the South). The second bye-road led to the half parish and was roughly blocked. The third bye-road, and the one mentioned by the author, was further South, about 30 yards from the priest's house. It also led to the half parish.

The second lorry which had halted near Fr. Conroy's house contained a machine gun (Ernie O'Malley states that it was a Lewis gun, while Ned Moane states that it was Hotchkiss gun). Gunfire and (later rifle grenades) was directed at the ambush point and into Knocknabola Hill and along in as far as they could direct. At this point, with the exception of those on Knocknabola Hill, the main ambush party was not in great danger. However, the men in the first lorry which broke through the ambush position dismounted and returned to the brigade near the tailor's house. "From this position, they were able to enfilade our front line," reported Michel Kilroy. After a number of casualties, he got his men to fall back to the second fence, 50 yards in the rear. Eventually, some of the enemy worked their way from the bridge, in as far as O'Flynn's (using the first bye-road) and erected a machine gun there. Heavy rifle and machine gun fire was directed across at Clooneen Hill. Kilroy realised that this advance of the enemy eastwards left the column open to enfilading fire along the second fence. After some time, he ordered a general withdrawal eastwards towards the half parish. This withdrawal under fire was a success and none of the men was wounded or captured after the main engagement at Kilmeena.

It is clear therefore that the main damage to the column was caused by the machine gun near the tailor's house and not by the machine gun mounted near Fr. Conroy's house. The latter was used, with some effect, but mainly during the retreat, as the enemy had moved in the third bye-road as far as O'Grady's house. Since all accounts, except Canon Killeen's, are in agreement that the main casualties oc-

curred at the first, second or third fences, it would appear that the British forces which came in the third bye-road had little effect on the casualties which occurred.

The fact that the dead and wounded were badly treated is ignored by the author. Captain Paddy O'Malley of Rosinrubbel, who had a leg wound, has stated that he was dragged by the wrists across fields and over banks and thrown in on top of the dead and wounded already lying in a lorry. His leg was amputated some years after the ambush. Paddy Jordan, the vice-comdt. of the Castlebar Battalion was the most senior I.R.A. officer who died as a result of the ambush. Although suffering from a head wound, he also was hauled by the legs and thrown into the lorry amongst his comrades. It has also been stated by Ernie O'Malley that Vol. P. Mulloy was shot in the leg when captured. The dead and wounded were first brought to Westport where the wounded eventually received medical attention. They had been left lying outside the R.I.C. Barracks for some time until protests from some Westport citizens caused the bodies to be moved. Eventually, the dead and wounded were brought to Castlebar Jail.

Canon Killeen's claim that Pearse was a spy cannot be sustained. Michael Kilroy's own account does not contain any reference to Pearse being a spy or to having found him in a daze on the battlefield. On the contrary, it states that Pearse remained behind because he would not leave his wounded pal Vol. Tom Nolan of Castlebar. Ernie O'Malley has stated that Pearse "had volunteered his services to the Column when it was neither safe nor opportune for a man to belong to such a unit." It is likely therefore that if either had any doubts about Pearse, they would not have hesitated to state them. It is also interesting to note that D.I. Donnellan R.I.C., who led the British party at the ambush, denied to Comdt. Tom Heavey (West Mayo Brigade) during the Truce, all knowledge of Pearse's involvement. Comdt. Heavey has the firm conviction that the District Inspector was telling the truth.

Pearse's fate however remains a mystery. After the ambush, he was never seen again in Mayo, despite rumours to the effect that he had been seen going around with Tans. None of these rumours has ever been confirmed. He is known to have been seen again on just two occasions. Capt. Paddy O'Malley informed the author that he saw him in King George V Hospital, Dublin, (now St. Bricin's Hospital) in the uniform of a Free State soldier during the Civil War. In 1939, Comdt. Brodie Malone (West Mayo Brigade) saw him in Westland Row Station and after shaking his hand spoke to him for some time. Malone, a no nonsense soldier would certainly not have done this if he had entertained any doubts regarding Pearse's actions. Regrettably, there is no information available on what transpired between them. Pearse was an orphan with no local relatives. It is therefore understandable that fears would arise that he might break under interrogation, particularly in view of his youth and the possibility of ill-treatment by his captors. There are no subsequent events which indicate that

this happened.

The number of I.R.A. killed is incorrectly stated in the article and in addition, Patrick Staunton of Kilmeena, is incorrectly referred to as "John Staunton." Altogether, there were 5 I.R.A. volunteers killed. Four died at Kilmeena on 19th May, 1921 and 1, Paddy Jordan, died from head wounds in the King George V Hospital, Dublin, on 15th June, 1921. These were: Vice-Comdt. Paddy Jordan, Castlebar (No. 1) Battalion, a native of Islandeady. Staff Capt. Seamus MacEvilly, do., a native of Castlebar. Vol. Thomas O'Donnell, do., a native of Rosinrubbel. Vol. Patrick Staunton, Newport (No. 2) Battalion, a native of Kilmeena. Vol. John Collins, Westport (No. 2) Battalion, a native of Belfast.

In all, 7 volunteers were wounded and of these, 4 were captured. One man who was not wounded (J. Pearse) was also captured.

The article incorrectly suggests that the only British casualty was one policeman who was wounded. The Castlebar newspaper "Mayoman" reported on 28th May, 1921 that "Constable Beckett — an Australian, who served with distinction in the Australian Light Horse and who had only six months service in the R.I.C." was killed. His background would suggest that he was a Black and Tan. The wounded policeman was in fact Head Constable Potter, R.I.C., Westport. Some written accounts refer to other British casualties, but with the exception of the above, they have not been confirmed.

The most valuable part of Canon Killeen's articles are his references to the names and activities of the priests involved on the day of the ambush. With the exception of the names of the two priests — Canon Killeen himself and Fr. Michael Walsh, (then C.C. Kilmeena), who rendered spiritual aid at the ambush, the remaining names were hitherto unknown. These two priests displayed remarkable courage in voluntarily going on to the battlefield when firing was still going on, particularly in view of the fact there is no suggestion made in any account that they were escorted by any of the British forces.

Canon Killeen was one of the few participants to have recorded his own experiences of the ambush. It is clear however that, where he departs in his article from these experiences, his observations, evidently written many years afterwards, cannot be relied upon.

SOURCES

- "Impressions and Recollections." General Crozier. P.251
- "Curious Journeys." Griffith and O'Grady. P.153
- "Connaught Telegraph," 25/5/1921.
- "Raids and Rallies." Comdt. General Ernie O'Malley. P.165
- Tape recording by Brig. General Eamonn Moane.
- Ibid.
- Statement (unpublished) Major General Michael Kilroy.
- Ibid.
- Tape recording by Brig. General Eamonn Moane.
- Mr. Willie Sammon, Carramore, Newport, 1982.
- "Raids & Rallies." Comdt. General Ernie O'Malley. P.168
- Ibid. P.167
- Ibid. P.167
- Information from Comdt. Tom Heavey, Churchtown, Dublin, 1981.
- Information from Mr. Willie Sammon, 1982.
- Information from Mr. Paddy Irwin, Main St., Castlebar, 1982.
- Statement (unpublished) Major General Michael Kilroy.
- "Western People." 28/5/1982.



Mr. John Cawley (centre), asst. manager A.I.B., Ballinrobe, presenting a cheque to Michael Coyne, chairman, and Martin Murphy, treasurer of Ballinrobe G.A.A. club, sponsorship towards the Centenary Mayor of Ballinrobe, the campaign which is now in progress.

Pic. Frank Dolan