

# The Broadford Soviet

"Broadford was Martin Kennedy", the old man stressed. "And if Kennedy didn't write a song about it (the Soviet), then it didn't exist!" A curious way of measuring reality, I suppose, and seemingly of little value when one is attempting to establish a pattern to events of sixty years ago. Yet, it later proved to be a most significant remark.

Martin Kennedy lived in the little village of Broadford, in south-east Clare. He died in 1930. He was a blacksmith by profession but was also the local balladeer. His compositions referred to most of the major social and political events in the area between 1850 and 1930. (1) It is rather strange that he never wrote a ballad about the Broadford Soviet, an event which was not without its significance at the time and the various repercussions of which were felt in the area for many years. The reason would seem to be, and a perfectly understandable one it is, that Broadford's venture into Bolshevism ended up in division and bitterness. Needless to say, Martin Kennedy, a man for getting up early, was unlikely to be caught singing ballads about an event which unfortunately had split the locality and pitted neighbour against neighbour. Besides, some of his own family were too close to the centre of the stage in the whole affair.

The Broadford Soviet, which began in February 1922 and lasted only a few months, consisted of the take-over by a group of tenants and labourers of a landlord's estate at Broadford village. At that time in Ireland soviets had become a common feature of the industrial and agricultural landscape. They were loosely based on their Russian counterparts, which were councils of workers, peasants and soldiers which had developed there subsequent to the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. In Ireland these councils of workers or soviets were an indication of the growing industrial power of organised labour after the 1916 Rising and gave local expression to the desire for immediate social revolution. They were a combination of nationalism and working class syndicalism. Workers wanted change and they wanted it immediately; if they did not see the changes taking place then they were prepared to initiate them.

At the beginning of 1922 the country was going through one of its most traumatic periods. The Anglo-Irish Treaty had been concluded in December 1921 and already feelings were running high. Republicans would not accept the Treaty because it betrayed the Republic. Free Staters argued that the Treaty gave the nation freedom to achieve freedom. The socialist minority at the time mainly saw the Treaty as a betrayal in that it was the death-knell to the prospect of establishing the Workers' Republic.

On 10 January Arthur Griffith formed a new government. On that same day it met with Trade Union Congress executives who had become concerned at the high level of unemployment and the general hardship of the time. Thousands of demobilised Irish soldiers had returned home after the war, all looking for work. "The veterans swelled Labour's ranks with a vast body of angry men, unused to the mild manners of civilian life, unpractised in the habits of deference, determined to wrest a livelihood out of the shopkeepers and strong farmers who had done so well out of the continental bloodletting". (2) No wonder Congress was concerned. On the same day that it met the Government, it issued a manifesto to the workers of Ireland asking them to turn now to the struggle against capitalism. "It is probable that the Labour Party and the trade unions were making a bid to direct the intense feelings, which the Treaty had given rise to, into more manageable channels. They were insistent that they had

by Michael McCarthy



Jack Kennedy, the Committee's treasurer, in old age.

not been consulted one way or the other about the Treaty. Certainly the country was in a strange and dangerous mood". (3).

On 16 January 1922 the Government went to Dublin Castle and the formal transfer of power took place. British troops were to be evacuated immediately; the Auxiliaries, Black and Tans, and the RIC were to be disbanded. During the following weeks units of the Volunteer army replaced the British in police barracks throughout the country. Some of these units were pro and others were anti-Treaty. Unfortunately in these circumstances, very often the Volunteers were more interested in watching each other and faction-fighting than in enforcing law and order.

A curious example of this occurred in Broadford. Captain William O'Brien was officer in charge of the army unit which moved into the police barracks there in February 1922. (4) Shortly afterwards he and his body of men were to change sides and become anti-Treaty. The official army then attempted to take possession of the barracks. Captain O'Brien was shot dead while resisting arrest. (5) His death immediately led to the heightening of tension in the village and surrounding area, as well as decreasing respect for the forces of law and order.

Against this backdrop of growing militarism and violence the country moved inexorably toward civil war. The soviet movement was also flourishing and the period

witnessed a sudden increase in the number of workers' councils taking over private businesses and agricultural undertakings. In many little villages and towns throughout the country the red flag replaced the green, the voices chorused "Then raise the scarlet standard high!" instead of "Let Erin Remember". It is difficult to establish at times whether these activities were motivated by a genuine Bolshevism or by a desperation born of the agricultural recession and general hardship.

At any rate, the Broadford experiment in February 1922 was by no means isolated. A few miles away in Co. Limerick, the Castleconnell Soviet, made up mostly of Irish Transport and General Workers Union workers, had just agreed to an arbitrator between itself and Anthony Mackey, whose fishery it had commandeered a few weeks earlier.(6) Quarterstown Mills, just outside Mallow, had been seized by Transport Union members in January.(7) Ballyneety had its land soviet.(8) At Mungret a cattle drive had been organised and labourers were demanding that the lands of a large estate be divided amongst them.(9) And in the other Broadford village in Co. Limerick Transport Union workers were also active, even to the extent of having forty "Bolshies" parade up the street singing "The Red Flag"!(10).

So it was not altogether strange when on the night of 22 February John Kennedy (known locally as Jack and son of Martin, the balladeer), accompanied by a group of men, broke down the door of a tenant farmers' meeting and announced that they were taking over the Going estate in Broadford, Co. Clare.(11).

James Dennison Going was an absentee landlord. He lived in 39, Warwick Road, Earls Court, London. He left Ireland shortly before World War 1, leaving the administration of his estate in the hands of Donogh R. O'Brien, an estate agent, of 74, O'Connell Street, Limerick. His lands, comprising over 300 acres, extended through the townlands of Drimeen, Claremount, Monageenagh, Violet Hill, and Knocknageehy.(12) He also owned an area called O'Shea's Acres which extended right into Broadford village, where the remains of the RIC barracks then stood. In all, Going had 26 tenant farmers on his estate.

The estate rental books for the year ending 25 March, 1922 showed that tenants were seriously in arrears with their payments. For Violet Hill alone, the nine tenants had paid only £71-2-0 out of a total rental of £350-2-2.(13) A number of reasons may have accounted for this — either the agricultural recession had hit the tenants rather badly, or the campaign of the Unpurchased Tenants' Association of Clare for the non-payment of rents had begun to be effective.(14) O'Brien, the land agent, who had recently lost his motor car and motor bike while collecting rents, complained bitterly to his landlord, "The position in this country at the moment is utterly hopeless. There is absolutely no law in the country. Any number of persons whose income came from land are now absolutely destitute".(15).

Whatever slim hope the agent may have had of collecting rents from the tenants before the estate was seized by the new group now disappeared altogether. In its first letter to him, dated 15 February 1922, the group submitted demands for a reduction in first and second term rents and for the distribution of grass lands among the small tenants; the object of these demands was stated to be "the combatting of the great evil of cattle driving". The letter was signed by Michael Collins, Claremount, Broadford. Collins farmed a holding of about 16 acres on the Going estate. The agent replied that it was not the fault of the landlord that the tenants were not proprietors, but inasmuch as he had not got increased rents when prices were high, it was not reasonable now to ask him to accept reduced rents.

Meetings of the group were held twice monthly in an old disused police post attached to Martin Devitt's farm,

which is situated between the villages of Broadford and O'Callaghan's Mills. Formerly the police post had been a school. The next move was to appoint valuers to assess the grazing value of the estate. Denis Donnellan, John Cooney and Pat McGrath were chosen for this task and they set the grazing value of about 300 acres of demesne lands at £110 for 6 months.(16) Michael Collins, on behalf of the group, wrote to the agent informing him of this valuation. O'Brien replied that the calculation was ridiculous, especially in view of the fact that rent and taxes on one section alone amounted to £172.(17).

Shortly after that there came a significant change. The group took the title of "The Committee of Farmers, Tenants, Workers and Transport Union Workers on the Going Estate". Michael Collins became its secretary; James Vaughan, son of Michael, another tenant, was assistant secretary. On 4 May the new organisation wrote to the agent informing him that it had appointed a committee of management to take charge of the lands of Violet Hill, Claremount and Gortnagannoloe for 6 months at the valuation of £110. It also proposed to let lands for tillage to landless men in Broadford, to close a part for meadowing, to appoint herds to watch stock and to keep fences in repair, and to place one of their members in possession of the Lodge of Violet Hill House. The Committee further directed James Going to remove his sheep and horses off the lands; otherwise he would be charged with the cost of their grazing and that sum would be deducted from the £110 otherwise payable. The letter closed with the hope that "by six months a proper form of Government would be in office which will attend to the land purchase of Ireland and start our country on new lines of agricultural progress".(18).

Another significant development had been the mention of the Transport Union in the Committee's title. The ITGWU was prominent in many soviets throughout the country, having played a big part in awakening a sense of pride and power in workers. It had been heavily involved in the agrarian agitation of previous years, particularly in mobilising the farm labourers. A resolution passed at its 29th annual general meeting is indicative of its agricultural policy at the time: "This Congress declares that the future prosperity of Irish agriculture resides in the co-operative administration and development of small holdings and the planting of larger farms and untenanted lands with the propertyless workers on the basis of common ownership".(19).

However, "in Clare the ITGWU was unusually slow to win support in the countryside".(20) In fact, the editor of the "Voice of Labour" complained, "Organisation is growing too slowly in Clare for our liking".(21) Only 22 branches were formed in the county by 1921.(22) Yet, Broadford never had a branch of the Transport Union. As one villager said to me, "At the time we didn't even have transport, not to talk of the Transport Union!" But the neighbouring village of O'Callaghan's Mills, 3¼ miles away, did have a branch. It was founded on 7 February 1922.(23) John Hurley, known locally as Sean, was the registered secretary. He was a ganger on the roads. Since the Transport Union became involved with the Committee, subsequent bi-monthly meetings alternated between the old police post at Devitt's farm and the hall in O'Callaghan's Mills.

During the late spring and summer the Committee really made its presence felt in the area. John Kavanagh, the tenant in the Lodge of Violet Hill House, was evicted and Harry Kennedy, another of Martin's sons, was put in his place. John Lacy, one of the two stewards in the employment of the landlord, got an eviction notice from the Committee but he refused to obey it. The other herdsman, Daniel Cooney, seemingly threw in his lot with the Soviet, having left Going's employment without giving notice.(24) Martin MacNamara, another member of the Committee, was appointed herdsman.

The existing stock on the estate were run off and "strange cattle" put in. In all there were over 50 yearlings and two-year olds, and nine milch cows.(25) Five acres of hay were cut and removed. Jack Kennedy, who had been appointed treasurer, collected over £80 in rent for the grazing of the land.(26) It is said that the Committee opened an account in the National Bank, Tulla.

It was the transfer of animals from one place to another which led to the premature breaking up of the Soviet. John Lacy, even though he had received a threatening letter from the Committee and had his cattle turned out on the side of the road, refused to leave his farm with his wife and young family. He had lived in Claremount for years, had been good friends with his neighbours, some of whom had turned against him, but he was determined to hold on to what he had.

Donogh O'Brien, the agent, had three horses grazing on Violet Hill. Late in the autumn these animals were driven from the hill down on to Lacy's holding in Claremount. A friend of Lacy's, Paddy Donnellan of Broadford, heard of the horses being moved into Lacy's holding. He went to Vaughan's farm on Violet Hill and met James, assistant secretary to the Committee, and Michael Vaughan, James' father. Many would claim that the latter was the brains and inspiration behind the Soviet. Donnellan told the Vaughans to get the horses out of Lacy's land. This was done, late on a Saturday night. On the following day the Committee held a meeting in the O'Callaghan's Mills' hall to discuss progress. Michael Vaughan was chairing the session when suddenly Paddy Donnellan burst in. He addressed the tenants, farmers, and farm labourers of the Committee present and told them that, while it was not his concern what they did to the landlords of the country, there was no way that he was going to allow any member of the Committee or anyone else for that matter to lay a hand on a friend and neighbour of his. As he turned on Michael Vaughan, whom he regarded as the ringleader, he shouted, "I did gaol before over land; I'll do the gallows for you", and then left the hall. John Lacy

was left alone after that.

By late 1922 the heart seemed to have gone out of the Committee. In November, O'Brien, the agent, visited Broadford and met Michael Collins on his holding. While the latter did not deny that he was secretary to the Committee, neither did he confirm it. The agent returned to Limerick and received an undated letter from Collins on November 21 exploring the possibility of handing the lands back to him. The agent replied on the following day that he had no intention of taking the lands back until full compensation was paid for damages done to the lands, houses and premises, as well as rental value.(27) That was the last correspondence between the agent and the Committee until 1925.

In the meantime a certain degree of normality returned to the estate. John Lacy put his cattle back on his holding. The "strange cattle" were removed. Daniel Cooney, the herdsman, was invited to return to work for the landlord.(28) The Vaughans sought a division in their holding but this was held up until they paid their arrears in rent. A semblance of peace was returning to the area, due in a way to the presence of civic guards, who had taken up residence in the old RIC barracks on O'Shea's Acres, interestingly enough a part of Going's estate.

On 24 June 1925 O'Brien, the agent, wrote to Michael Collins, "In connection with the occupation of these lands, the Government are not paying for the use of these lands, so your Committee will have to do so. Please let me have £175-0-0. Mr. Going has been out of this money for some time so I must ask you to let me have prompt payment".(29) Collins replied on 7 July that he knew nothing of the matter! The agent finally wrote again on 19 September requesting payment and warning that unless the money was paid legal proceedings would be introduced against the Committee without any further notice. The Committee did not reply.

Donogh O'Brien wrote to his solicitor, A. Blood-Smyth, 47, O'Connell Street, Limerick, on 5 March, 1926 enclosing the file of letters written and received by him in con-



The 1922 Ordnance Survey Map of the Broadford district, including O'Shea's Acres and other parts of the Going Estate.

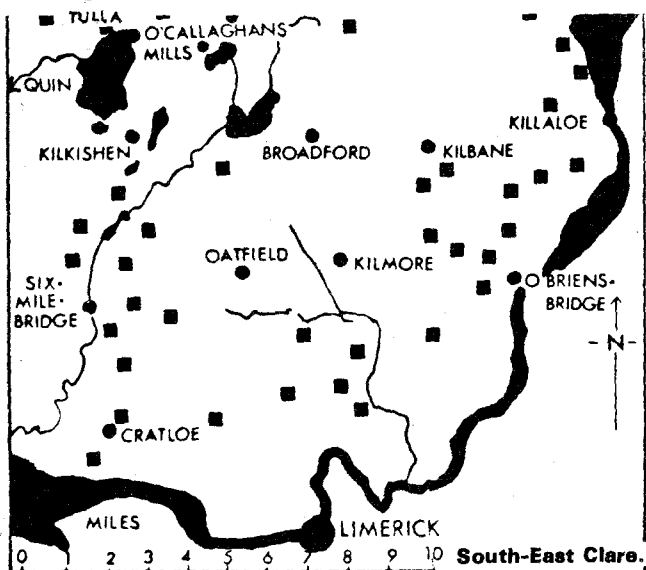
nection with the happenings on the Going estate since February 1922. (30) Within the month legal proceedings had been taken against the Committee.

The case of James D. Going against Michael Collins arose for hearing at the Easter sittings of Ennis Circuit Court on Monday, 7 April. (31) Judge McElligott presided. Going, the plaintiff, sought to recover £175 damages against Michael Collins in respect of the forcible seizure in 1922 of demesne lands at Broadford. Witnesses called were Donogh O'Brien, the agent, and the following members of the Committee, Daniel Cooney, Martin Mac-Namara, John Lacy, James Vaughan, John Kennedy, and Michael Collins. A notable omission from this list of witnesses was Michael Vaughan. In fact, after the court hearing Going is reported as having said, "We got the wrong man. Michael Vaughan is the one we should have prosecuted".

George Cullinan, counsel for the plaintiff, outlined the facts of the case. O'Brien, the agent, then gave evidence. Later in the proceedings Collins was called to the witness box. He denied all knowledge of the Soviet and claimed that it must have been his son, Michael, who had written the letters. The latter would have been in his thirties, but had emigrated to America a short time before. Collins stated that he never put cattle on the lands and was not a party to putting them on. "In fact", he said, "I was never on the lands or crossed them except when I was going to Mass or hunting rabbits!" (32)

Joseph Reidy was counsel for the defence, and while he did the best he could in very difficult circumstances, he could not prevent the ruling against his client.

Giving judgement for £135, with £11 for costs and £2 for expenses, Judge McElligott said that he regarded Collins as a conspirator and a tortfeasor and that he was responsible for the entire delinquencies of his co-conspirators. (33) This was not entirely fair to Collins, particularly when Michael Vaughan and others did not even have to appear in court.



The verdict of the Circuit Court was appealed. The case came up for hearing at the High Court, Dublin, before Justices O'Sullivan and O'Byrne on 23 July. Collins and the other members of the Committee failed to turn up.

So the Committee which had disbanded years before now had to find £148 as well as solicitor's fees. Some claim that shortly after the court case Michael Vaughan and Collins travelled to Tulla and, with whatever money they had left in the Committee's account at the National Bank, settled with the agent. Others claim that a collection was made in the locality for Collins and that this was put toward defraying the bill. It is also said that the Transport Union footed the bill. Another informant

held that the agent waived most of the amount and did not press Collins on the matter. Whatever the true version, one thing is certain: the agent was not hopeful of ever getting the money. He wrote to his landlord, "The trouble is to get the decree executed ... The Government gets decrees for money due to themselves fast enough, but it is impossible in Clare to get other decrees executed — part of the lack of law prevailing in Ireland". (34).

Interestingly enough, local Catholic Church representatives never took sides or became involved in the row between the Committee and the landlord. There were plenty of warnings about the cloven hoof of socialism emanating from pulpits up and down the country. However, two weeks after the appeal by the Committee in the High Court, members of Limerick's Redemptorist Confraternity were told "to eschew the Bolshevik movement and not to be led away by the specious arguments of men who were associated with the Soviet doctrine". (35).

It is impossible to say to what degree the genuine spirit of Bolshevism motivated the men of Broadford and O'Callaghan's Mills in February 1922, just as it is equally impossible to pronounce categorically on the many other strikes and take-overs throughout the country at the time. But the fact that the tenants, small farmers and labourers became organised in the manner in which they did, and that they struck against the landlord system which had emasculated them for so long, was significant enough to earn them a place in the history of the Irish soviet movement of the period.

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