

O'Duffy's Other Brigade

by Michael McCarthy

Many students of Irish history are familiar with the rather tragicomic episode in 1936 when General Eoin O'Duffy led his brigade of Blushirts to fight on Franco's side in the Spanish Civil War. This was the same General O'Duffy who was the first leader of Fine Gael. He was also the first commissioner of the Garda Síochána, appointed by Kevin O'Higgins in 1922, dismissed ten years later by de Valera, as soon as the latter came to power. He was also one-time Inspector General and General-Officer - Commanding the army following the mutiny in 1924. But little is known of what could be called "O'Duffy's Other Brigade" which he proposed to the Cumann na nGaedheal government in 1930 when he was still commissioner of police.

Cosgrave and the Executive Council had been quite concerned about the physical security of the Shannon Scheme ever since construction began in 1925. The Government saw the whole operation as being of prime im-



General Eoin O'Duffy inspecting the Civic Guards.

portance. The scheme was the major investment of the decade, it was also crucial for the Government's prestige and was to be a measure of its success that the electrification of the country be achieved on time and within the budget specified. Considering the unsettled circumstances in post-Civil War Ireland, Cosgrave and his colleagues reckoned that the power plant at Ardnacrusha could be a prime target for subversive groups.

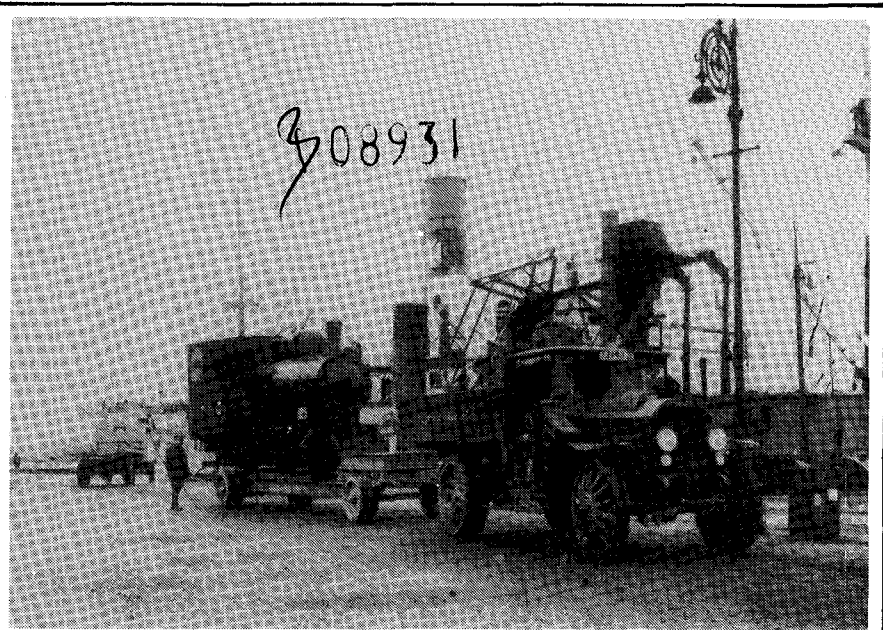
One could already detect elements of paranoia at a preliminary conference between representatives of the departments of Defence, Industry and Commerce and the Board of Works in January 1926. The conference recommended that military protection of a permanent nature be provided which should include a barracks of 300 men at Ardnacrusha and a detachment of Air Force with two aeroplanes. It also proposed a military base for 25 men at O'Brien's Bridge with anti-aircraft guns as well as a number of block-houses in strategic positions. By late 1926 the Minister for Defence visited Ardnacrusha and chose a site for the new barracks.

The Department of Finance was the chief supporter of these rather grandiose plans. The extensive defence of the Shannon Scheme presented an ideal opportunity for that department to test and build up its strength, especially since Government policy had meant severe reductions in all areas of the army over the previous two years. Every argument in furtherance of the plans was marshalled. For example, the GOC of the Southern Command in a memo in early 1926 warned "that, as private individuals can keep and use aeroplanes, there is every reason to believe that organised criminals could use aeroplanes to carry out their intentions". But the mandarins of the Department of Finance were not so easily convinced.

Extensive correspondence between the Department and the Government centred around whether the plans should be allowed and if so which department should pay. The nett result was that the elaborate plans of the army were trimmed and modified. By 1928 the idea of the new barracks was dropped.

The Department of Finance was now agreeable to "a ring of wires capable of taking a voltage sufficient to kill a man ... to be located at a distance of 300 yards all round the power house". The memo added that "this would provide very effective protection ...". It certainly would, but the proposal of this rather lethal measure was sufficient to shock those in authority who put an end to any further talk of aeroplanes or anti-aircraft guns, temporarily at least.

It was not until the middle of 1930 that the whole question of Shannon



Machinery for the Shannon Scheme being unloaded at Limerick Docks.

Scheme security was opened up again. A meeting of the Executive Council was scheduled for May 20 on the agenda appeared the item "Protection of Shannon Works". A preparatory letter had been sent to members of the council by the secretary of the Department of Industry and Commerce outlining the various aspects of the question. It also detailed certain elements on which the Minister, Paddy McGilligan, would be seeking decisions from the Council - for example, whether the power house and the weir should be enclosed by a "live wire" fence if necessary; whether armed Bank Rangers should patrol the area of the Head-race, etc. The Minister also wanted a decision on who should have responsibility for protection - the military, the police or the newly established Electricity Supply Board.

The secretary of the Department enclosed with the preparatory letter a four page memo from General O'Duffy to the private secretary of the Minister for Industry and Commerce on how best to protect the hydro-electric station.

O'Duffy began by stating that he had conducted meetings with the local Chief Superintendent and Deputy-Commissioner Coogan on the matter.

"I would wish to point out at the outset that it establishes an entirely new precedent to allocate the duties and responsibilities of protecting the Shannon Scheme Works to the Garda. Owing to the vastness of the Shannon Works and owing to their great importance as a national asset I believe that whatever protective arrangements are made must be comprehensive and must necessarily be of a constant and rigid kind. The Military Authorities have at their disposal the necessary equipment for af-

fording effective protection, the members of the Defence Forces being trained specially for duties of this nature. A Military Protection party is likely to inspire more awe than a Police Protection party, for the simple reason that the public have a greater dread of the armed soldier than of the armed policeman. The public believe that the armed policeman is under greater legal restraint, and they are, therefore, inclined to attribute greater licence to the armed soldier. Furthermore the question of policy arises as to the desirability of having units of the Garda fully armed at Ardnacrusha and Parteen Villa respectively.

If, however, the Executive Council feel that the Shannon Works can be effectively protected by the Garda, I am prepared to undertake the duty and responsibility under conditions set out hereunder:-

The protection rendered must be capable of warding off any possible attack from:

- (a) The Irregulars.
- (b) Communists.
- (c) Unemployed malcontents, who might consider that the destruction of the plant would create further employment.
- (d) Foreign agents (jealous of the success of this important project).

To do this effectively it will be necessary to arm the units with machine guns and rifles, and the members selected must carry out their duties in uniform. It would be most unseemly, particularly to foreign visitors to place men in civilian garb upon this duty. I consider that any member of the Public Force carrying arms publicly, as a rifle must be carried, should be clothed in the official livery of the State. Granted the necessary number of men, I can un-

dertake to defend the Works under peace time conditions - as at present'.

O'Duffy then went on to outline his plans for the defence of the scheme. He dealt first of all with Ardnacrusha and suggested five measures:

"(a) The creation of a steel fence across portion of the Tail-race. This to act as a safeguard against the approach of evilly disposed persons by water. Presently it is possible for a hostile party to come from Limerick by steel-protected motor boat, and even a sentry armed with a rifle could not prevent them carrying out their purpose.

(b) The erection of a Wire or Steel Netting across the Head-Race. No matter how much armed protection is afforded at the Power House it is quite possible to destroy the Dam and Works by means of a floating mine placed in the Canal at Blackwater Bridge. A mine dropped there would be carried into one of the three unused Intake openings in the Dam or against the Wreckage Screen and with sufficient force to cause it to explode and demolish the Dam. I consider, therefore, the erection of the Wire Netting a necessary precaution, which has not, so far, been suggested. The erection of the netting would not interfere with navigation.

(c) The erection of an unclimbable Wire Fence to enclose the Works. I am of opinion that it should be eight feet high and that it should be extended so as to impale completely the outdoor Station. I do not think that it will be necessary to make the Fence "live" - attackers of any degree of skill can cut through such a fence - but barbed wire entanglements should be erected within the Fence.

(d) Lamp Standards should be erected, at close intervals, inside the entanglements.

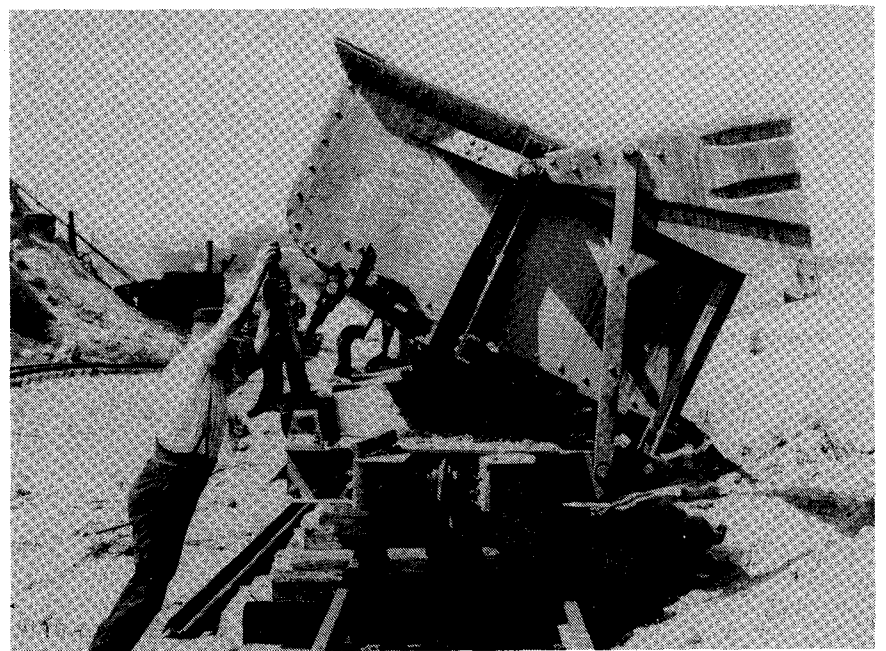
(e) A moveable Searchlight should be provided on the top of the Intake Building".

The general included a postscript with the five measures which is interesting because of the flavour it gives of the prevailing siege mentality of the officialdom:

"It should be understood that all persons being admitted to the Works are liable to close scrutiny and search. Arising out of this, it may not be amiss to draw attention to the possibility of disloyalty in the personnel of the control staff. We should be satisfied that any person employed in the Works is above suspicion, and to this end it will be necessary to make Police inquiries into the character, antecedents, etc. of the personnel of the control staff, and to take whatever precautions may be deemed necessary. I need not point out that one disloyal member of the Staff can do more harm from within than coun-

less attackers from outside. I consider that it will be necessary to keep the keys of all wicket and other gates with the Sergeant on duty for the time being, and that the responsibility for opening and closing the gates should rest with him".

O'Duffy then detailed the number of men he would need for the protection of the power house. One superintendent, three sergeants and 28 men would be necessary, he stated, and "since there is no suitable accommodation at Ardnacrusha a barracks will have to be built which will cost £4,000".



Work in progress on the Shannon Scheme.

For Parteen Villa he proposed two measures:

1. A wire or steel fence on each side of the weir and intake building to stop mines or people approaching by water; and

II. Wire fencing to surround the works. Three sergeants and 18 men would be necessary, he thought, to look after defence. He pointed out that even though accommodation was available at O'Brien's Bridge over a mile away, the guards might be ambushed coming or going to the weir. Therefore he suggested that a barracks be built at Parteen Villa and estimated the cost at £2,500.

Besides having men stationed at Ardnacrusha and Parteen Villa, O'Duffy provided for armed patrols to guard both banks of the Head-race to keep out unwanted visitors. Co-ordinating all police activities in either centre would be a senior garda officer.

O'Duffy pointed out that anything in the nature of joint responsibility with the military would be out of the question. Furthermore, if the Executive Council were to pass his proposals he

suggested that the council authorise him to recruit the extra men so that the necessary training in the care and use of guns could begin immediately. "We have, of course, many ex-members of the National Army in the garda and we will have no difficulty in getting suitable men". He concluded that he could not undertake the protection of the Shannon works with a smaller number of men or at less expense to the state.

At its meeting on May 20th, 1930, the Executive Council failed to approve the O'Duffy proposals. Once again, the whole question was shelved.

In 1930 a Department of Finance memo noted that "the military ideas of Shannon protection, grandiose a few years ago, have fizzled out ... the whole affair looks bad and may eventually catch the eye of the Comptroller and Auditor General". This last point referred to a house which had been bought for officers but remained unused and was now being sold at a loss. "We can only be grateful that the state has been spared the heavy and unnecessary expense on the erection of barracks".

Eventually in 1933 the new Fianna Fail Government decided that the civic guards should protect the scheme. The local sergeant and his four men, in addition to their duties, took on the task and were eminently successful.

O'Duffy's failure to mobilise this force did not deter him for too long. A few years later his most famous Ruritanian escapade, somewhat reminiscent of "Slattery's Mounted Fut", was to lead him and his followers (many of them from Limerick) to the Spanish Civil War and back, without a shot being fired - except at their own troops.