TRAGEDY AT COOLBOOREEN

THE DEATH OF

WINIFRED BARRINGTON

by Kevin Hannan

were not regarded as pulling their weight in the fight, with a view to relieving enemy pressure on some of the southern brigades. The meeting was held in some hall in Parnell Square, Dublin, and McCormack and myself travelled by train to and from Dublin.

In the Newport area the IRA organisation was up against the ruthless activities of District Inspector Biggs, who engaged in burning the houses of I.R.A. men, shooting

Winifred Frances Barrington, aged 5 weeks.
volunteers and civilians, beating up men, and on one occasion at Silvermines, after Mass on a Sunday, he rounded up the congregation and ordered the people to sing "God save the King", which they made an effort to do after volleys having been fired over their heads. A favourite practice of this officer was to bring well known I.R.A. supporters in lorries as hostages through the country. Old Matt Ryan, father of the prominent I.R.A. man, Paddy Ryan (Lacken), was kept a prisoner at Newport for two or three months and was used frequently as a hostage. In addition, Old Ryan, while imprisoned, was threatened almost every day by Biggs, particularly in regard to the fate that awaited his son, Paddy, should he ever be captured.

With the two-fold purpose of putting the Newport area into a properly organised state and of shooting D.I. Biggs, I went to the Newport district on the 15th of May, 1921. I stayed that night outside the village of Newport, and was thinking of going to bed when Paddy Ryan (Lacken), Tom McGrath and Dinny Hayes arrived in the house, after coming back from a period of service with the East Limerick Brigade, during which another colleague of their's, Paddy Starr, Nenagh, had lost his life fighting in the Lackelly ambush. In discussions I had with these three men, they agreed to come with me to a meeting of the 6th (Newport) Battalion which I had convened for the following night in the Ballinahinch country. Next day, on our way to Ballinahinch, we called at McGrath's, where we were told that a car had passed the house and they had recognised in it D.I. Biggs, two other men in civilian attire, and two females. Miss McGrath came back to tell us this news, and suggested that the car was on its way to the house of a Major Gabbitt, a well known loyalist, who frequently entertained D.I. Biggs and his friends. Our reaction to this news was to rise from the dinner and make preparations to ambush the car on its return journey. As there were two roads running between Killoscull (Major Gabbitt's residence) and Newport, we decided to collect about a dozen local volunteers who had shotguns to ensure that both roads would be watched and the car attacked to either road. Myself, Paddy Ryan (Lacken), Tom McGrath, Dinny Hayes and four of the Newport volunteers took up positions at Coolboreen, four miles from Newport, while the other men went to the Rossaguile road.

At Coolboreen there is a bend of the road coming from Killoscull. Inside the fence, on the right-hand side of
Winifred Barrington, pictured in her nurse’s uniform as a Volunteer Ambulance Division assistant at Queen Mary’s Auxiliary Hospital, Roehampton, during the First World War.

Winifred Barrington, pictured in her nurse’s uniform as a Volunteer Ambulance Division assistant at Queen Mary’s Auxiliary Hospital, Roehampton, during the First World War.

On Tuesday, 17 May, the Limerick Chronicle carried a report on the deaths of Winifred Barrington and Henry Biggs:

Fuller particulars obtained of the fatal ambush show that the motor car contained a party of five – two ladies, Miss Winifred Barrington, Miss Coverdale, Major Biggs, District Inspector R.I.C., Captain Tamgouse, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, and Mr. William Gabbett, Mount Rivers, Newport. It would appear that Miss Barrington and Miss Coverdale, who was a guest at Glenstal Castle, Murroe, the seat of Sir Charles and Lady Barrington, proceeded to Newport in the afternoon, where they met Mr. Gabbett, who is a friend of the Barrington family. Miss Barrington rode on a pony and Miss Coverdale cycled. On the way they were met not far from Glenstal by Sir Charles, who had only just returned from London. Sir Charles addressed his daughter, and asked her to be home for dinner. When Miss Barrington and her lady friend reached Newport they were joined by Mr. Gabbett, Major Biggs, and Captain Tamgouse. It was suggested by one of the party that they should go fishing for the evening, and the suggestion was complied with. The pony and bicycle were left in Newport, and the party of five set out in a private motor, and the evening was spent fishing in the road and on the Newport side of the bridge, myself, Paddy Ryan (Lacken) and Tom McGrath, both with rifles, and one of the local volunteers with a shot-gun, were waiting. Forty yards or so further on towards Newport but on the opposite side of the road, Dinny Hayes, with a rifle, was in charge of three local volunteers, equipped with shotguns. Two hundred yards to my left we had a scout posted in a prominent position to warn us when the motor car would be coming back.

After we were signalled that the quarry was approaching and when the car had passed the bridge, all my party opened fire. The car went on for about twenty yards, and then came to a halt on the left-hand side of the road. Three people alighted from it. The local volunteer who was with us, and who knew the District Inspector, shouted, “That’s the D.I.!” We reopened fire on these three people. One of them ran off towards Newport and escaped, one fell in the centre of the road and the third fell into the ditch. After a few minutes another man emerged from the car with his hands up, and he came towards us. He turned out to be Major Gabbett. He informed us that Miss Barrington had been shot. She was by no means frightened, and proceeded to give us “dog’s” abuse for having shot Miss Barrington. Miss River’s language upset me somewhat, but Ryan quickly silenced her when he said “Only for the bitch being in bad company she would not be shot!” The car was searched but it contained nothing of interest to us. The man who had fallen in the centre of the road turned out to be District Inspector Biggs, and he was dead. Miss Barrington was badly wounded, having been shot through the lung. We got the women in nearby houses to take her in and render whatever aid they could. She died in a few hours. She was the only daughter of a big landowner in Glenstal, County Limerick.

On Tuesday, 17 May, the Limerick Chronicle carried a report on the deaths of Winifred Barrington and Henry Biggs:

Winifred Barrington, pictured in her nurse’s uniform as a Volunteer Ambulance Division assistant at Queen Mary’s Auxiliary Hospital, Roehampton, during the First World War.

Winifred at twenty.
Newport river beyond Killoscully. On the return journey, and when between Killoscully and Newport, at about half past seven o'clock, the car was suddenly ambushed. Major Biggs was driving, and Miss Barrington was sitting next him, the other three being seated behind.

On the same day (Tuesday) as this report appeared in the Chronicle, a military inquiry into the deaths was held at the New Barracks, Limerick. A report of the proceedings was published in the Limerick Chronicle, on Thursday, 19 May:

'A lady witness stated that she was at Newport on the date in question with the deceased, Miss Barrington, a civilian and officer, and the late Captain Biggs. They motored to a house where they had tea. On the return journey, and when they got to Coolboreen bridge, fire was opened from both sides of the bridge and behind. Captain Biggs, who was driving, was hit in the throat, and the car stopped after going a few yards. The three men jumped from the car and ran up the road, Miss Barrington being beside him, and he thought that she must have been also hit then. Captain Biggs got out of the car and advanced about twenty yards up the road and then fell. Witness and the officer also got out, and he saw the officer on the road with his revolver in his hand. Witness started to crawl in the direction of Captain Biggs, the other lady remaining in the car. The firing was going on all the time on his right and left and from behind. Witness next heard the officer ask Capt. Biggs if he could help him, but he received no reply. The officer then turned Biggs over, and eventually he thought he saw him fire two or three shots. Captain Biggs and the officer were dressed in civilian clothes. While the firing was

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date and Place of Death</th>
<th>Name and Status of Deceased</th>
<th>Cause of Death and Nature of Injury</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19 May</td>
<td>Winifred Barrington</td>
<td>Shot and wounding of body</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Civilian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Coroner's Certificate of Finding of Jury.

To be sent to the Registrar within five days after the Finding of the Jury is given.

To the Registrar of Births and Deaths for the District of in the Superintendent

Regislor's District of

Pursuant to the Act, 45 & 46 Vic., cap. 13, intituled: "An Act to amend the Law in Ireland relating to the Registration of Births and Deaths."

I HEREBY CERTIFY that at an inquest held by me on the body of Henry Biggs Private Car, District Inspector Biggs, deceased, on the road in the Parish of Coolboreen in this County of Limerick, on the 18th day of May, 1923, the said Henry Biggs, being the body lying dead, the said body found as follow:

\[\text{Table:}
\begin{array}{|l|l|l|l|}
\hline
\text{Col.} & \text{Name and Surname of Deceased.} & \text{Sex.} & \text{Condition as to Marriage.} \\
\hline
14 & \text{HENRY BIGGS. M.} & 2 & 25 \\
\hline
\end{array}\]

In the course of the inquest, the body was examined, and the cause of death was certified to be a wound to the head, caused by a bullet, and the body was conveyed to the morgue for further examination.

Witnesse to the facts above stated, this day of...

[rest of document continues...]

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Death certificate of Henry Biggs.

going one witness saw some men come out on the bridge, and he shouted to them to stop firing, that there was only a girl in the car. At this time he had his hands up, and he next saw about twelve men on the road. One of them said to witness "You have a pistol in your hand", and he replied that it was only a pipe. Witness then removed his gloves and was covered by two men with revolvers. The leader asked where was Biggs, and witness said he was lying on the road, and that the only person in the car was a lady. While on the roadway ten or twelve shots were fired from rifles into the body of Captain Biggs, one man remarking that he was the man they wanted.

The funeral of Winifred Barrington took place to Abington cemetery on Wednesday, 18 May. A report of the funeral, including a generous tribute to 'the amiable young girl,' was published in the Limerick Chronicle on 19 May. The report stated: 'Passing through the village of Murroe all houses were closed and blinds drawn. The bell of the Catholic Church tolled mournfully until the end procession passed out of sight.'

For people of all political persuasions, the death of Winnie Barrington had been too high a price to pay for the major's head. The feelings of her close friends in Ireland by the Auxiliary police and military. A few days after the brutal murder by Crown forces of Denis O'Donovan at his premises, Shannon Hotel, Castleconnell, Biggs, with a drawn revolver in hand, searched every part of the hotel for surgeon Harrison Cripps, who was on a fishing holiday in Castleconnell and had been staying in the hotel. Doubtless, it was his intention to silence the surgeon, who had witnessed the savagery a few days previously. Unknown to Biggs, Hamson Cripps had broken off his holiday, and was on his way to London, where he wrote a very famous letter to his brother, Lord Parmoor, who read it in the House of Lords, a full account of what had happened in Castleconnell, and of the cruel conduct of the Auxiliary forces there. This disclosure led to a heated debate, and Parmoor and Cecil crossed the floor of the House as a protest against the activities of the Crown forces in Ireland.

William T. Cosgrave, in a letter to one of Limerick's most prominent citizens, stated that Lord Parmoor's protest and disclosures had had a salutary affect on Lloyd George, who shortly afterwards looked for a truce.
Glenstal were set out in the following account by Fr. Hubert Janssens de Varabeke, in 1928:

"Sir Charles Barrington’s daughter was very popular about Glenstal. Now that she is dead for some years, all the people from Murroe, and even from Limerick and Tipperary, say that she was extremely nice. "She was not a bit proud", says Sir Charles’ farming workmen. "She was quite wild", says Mr. O’Brien, who lives in the lodge at the entrance of the park. He says that she came inside his little house and did his cooking ... she had been cooking for a London ambulance division during the European War. When she was on a journey, even abroad, she used to send postcards to the gate-keeper, telling him she would soon be back to do his cooking. "Now was not that a nice lady?" says Mr. O’Brien. "I always said: nicer than Winnie Barrington will never be found!" Mr. O’Brien is aged eighty, and had been in charge of the officers’ mess with the Irish Fusiliers in the British Army, in Ireland, Canada, Egypt, India, Aldershot and the Channel Islands ... Afterwards, for more than twenty-five years, he was in the service of Sir Charles Barrington, Bart., who is exactly as old as himself.

Miss Barrington was nice to everyone.

At the time of the troubles in Ireland, after the Great War, she was also the friend of an English police officer of the "Black-and-Tans". Sir Charles and Lady Barrington knew nothing about it. A man of Newport who had served in the British Army told me: "The officers of the regular British Army were alright; but the commander of the police in Newport was altogether a bad man, I knew his people in Aldershot: That man was to leave Ireland on Whit Sunday, 1921! He thought if he took Miss Barrington with him on his night walks he would be safe, because Miss Barrington had always been good to everyone. Some of the Irish Volunteers had sworn that the police Commander of Newport would never escape alive from Ireland, after all the evil he had done.

Sir Charles Barrington came home from the station on Saturday afternoon, May 14th. His daughter greeted him, and then went out for tea, riding her white pony and accompanied by a lady friend on her bicycle. At the outside gate, Mr. O’Brien, who guessed where she was going, tried to stop her: "I am a soldier myself, but I would not dare to speak to those soldiers across the street", he said. She replied that, having been in the ambulance..."
'Here lies all that could die of Winifred Frances Barrington...'. Grave at Abington churchyard.

service and in the Flying Corps during the Great War, she need not fear anyone. And she went on. About three miles beyond Newport, at Coolboreen (Co. Tipperary), the ambush was laid at a turn of the road. The motor car came on with the Black-an-Tan officer, Miss Barrington and her friend, and one or two more. A volley of bullets was fired. The officer and Miss Barrington were killed. Her lady friend was wounded in the foot, while a gentleman from Newport, Mr. Gabbitt, escaped unhurt. It is said that Miss Barrington, being dressed in her riding outfit and wearing the officer’s cap, was not discovered to be a woman until she was killed. As she was seated beside the driver, a bullet aimed at him struck her. That night Mr. O’Brien saw a motor-lorry of the police coming, with a clergyman seated beside the driver. Next morning, when the coachman, who was lodged in the castle yard, was going to Mass, Mr. O’Brien asked him what these armed police had come for: "They brought Winnie back", was the answer. Nobody had heard about it yet in the village. "That will drive Sir Charles out of the

country", said the old man. The body was laid out in the big room over the entrance hall. It was surrounded by blooms of the largest pink rhododendrons. "Miss Winifred looked as if she were still alive", said her old teacher. She was aged 23. She was buried in Abington on Wednesday, May 16th, 1921. Her parents did not allow her sisters to come to Ireland for the funeral owing to the disturbed state of the country. The stone above her grave bears the following inscription: "Here lies all that could die of Winifred Frances Barrington".

... It might be mentioned that Sir Charles gave away freely the site and the stone for the building of Murroe Catholic church, and allowed a bazaar to be held in support of the building fund, on the entrance field of his park.

THE AFTERMATH

The foregoing gives us a clear picture of the sad event, but what of the aftermath? Was there a change in the relationships between Sir Charles and the people around him, including the I.R.A.? Hardly: the condolences of the ambush party were accepted with quiet dignity by the parents of Miss Barrington. There appears to have been no ill-feeling. The tragedy was accepted for what it was, an unfortunate error of judgement, precipitated by the intoxicating opportunity of avenging the misdeeds of the District Inspector, who was due to leave the country in a few days - and time was fast running out!

THE LACKELLY VICTIMS

Proof of Sir Charles’ tolerance was in evidence after the Truce when the parish priest of Murroe refused the burial in the church grounds of Jim Frahill and Pat Ryan, who were killed in the engagement at Lackelly in May, 1921. The bodies had been interred locally, and their friends wished them to be buried in the Murroe church grounds. On hearing of this impasse, Sir Charles offered his own grave for the dead men. At this the priest did an about-turn, and the grave was opened in the church grounds and lined with mosses and flowers provided by the gardeners of Glenstal, on instructions from Sir Charles.

There are those who believe that the Barringtons left Glenstal as a result of the loss of their only daughter, but this is an over-simplification. The truth is that the family simply could not afford to maintain their castle and greatly diminished estate, the Land Acts having whittled down the size of the estate to an uneconomic size.

Still, there was no getting away from the spectre of their lost loved one.