

The Attack on Kilmallock R.I.C. Barracks May 1920

DR DEIRDRE McMAHON

Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

An R.I.C. report, discovered in the Lloyd George papers in the House of Lords Record Office in London, sheds new light on the 1920 attack on the police barracks at Kilmallock. It is printed here for the first time with a commentary on the episode based on its contents and in the context of recent scholarship.

The I.R.A. attack on the Kilmallock R.I.C. barracks during the night of 27-28 May 1920 was planned as part of a series of large-scale attacks on R.I.C. barracks in County Limerick. It resulted in the deaths of three people: two R.I.C. men, Sergeant Thomas Kane and Constable Joseph Morton, and an I.R.A. volunteer, Liam Scully. The attack has been described in a number of studies: Michael Quirke's article for *An tÓglach* in 1928; *Limerick's Fighting Story* (c.1948); Mainchín Seoighe's *The Story of Kilmallock* (1987); Mike Raftery's essay in the *Lough Gur Historical Journal* (2000) and finally Tom Malone's recent biography of his father Tomás, *Alias Seán Forde* (2000).¹ What is missing is any account of the attack from the R.I.C. side. Earlier this year I found a report of the attack in the papers of David Lloyd George, who was British Prime Minister from 1916 to 1922. The report was written by District Inspector W.A. Egan on the day of the attack and was sent to London by the Chief Secretary, Hamar Greenwood. The report is reproduced in an appendix at the end of this article. It has prompted another look at the origins and aftermath of the attack, from both the British and the Irish sides, on the basis of new archival evidence which has emerged over the last twenty years.

The Kilmallock attack came at a turning point of the War of Independence. I.R.A. attacks on R.I.C. barracks had been escalating since the autumn of 1919. The R.I.C. was responsible for over 1300 barracks and huts throughout the country and the pressure of the I.R.A. attacks soon told. It became necessary to move the R.I.C. in from isolated rural areas and to concentrate the force in the larger towns and cities. This happened in Limerick, Clare, Galway and Tipperary initially but soon extended to the rest of the country. In Meath eleven out of thirty one R.I.C. stations were closed. The R.I.C., as Charles Townshend has noted in his book *The British Campaign in Ireland 1919-1921* (1975), was armed but did not have military weapons. Instead of rifles, it had Martini-Medford carbines. The standard of musketry was also poor: "The last generation of constables had found little use for firearms in their job, and they were regarded as mere encumbrances, a psychological barrier between the R.I.C. and the community."² However, in the winter of 1919-1920 large numbers of revolvers and Colt automatics were ordered for the R.I.C. Motor transport was also a big problem. The barracks into which the R.I.C. moved were fortified with flat steel shutters but the Kilmallock attack revealed that these new shutters were not nearly as sturdy as the ones installed fifty-three years earlier during the

¹ Michael Quirke, *The Battle of Kilmallock*, *An tÓglach* vol.1 no 4 July-September 1928, pp.54-9; Mainchín Seoighe, *The Story of Kilmallock*, Kilmallock 1987; Mike Raftery, *Attack on Kilmallock R.I.C. Barracks on 28 May 1920*, *Lough Gur and District Historical Society Journal*, vol., 11, 2000 pp 15-8; Tom Malone, *Alias Seán Forde*, Limerick 2000; Quirke gives an incorrect date for the attack at the start of his article and this has been repeated in Herlihy's work [see note 11 below]. Malone relies on Quirke for his treatment of the episode.

² Charles Townshend, *The British Campaign in Ireland 1919-1921*, Oxford, 1975 pp.42-3.

Fenian disturbances. The memory of the failed Fenian attack on the barracks³ was also in the minds of some of the attackers as they waited for the assault to begin: "What a change we said to each other ... from '67."⁴

In the two months before the attack, there had been high-level changes in the civil, military and police administration in Ireland. In March 1920 Sir Nevil Macready became the new commander-in-chief of British forces in Ireland. In April there was a major shake-up at Dublin Castle with the appointment of a new Chief Secretary, Sir Hamar Greenwood, a new under-secretary, John Anderson, followed by the appointment of new police adviser, Major General H.M. Tudor, on 15 May. Anderson, who took up his position on 22 May, just a week before the Kilmallock attack, observed that "the police forces were in a critical condition. The morning I arrived in Dublin the Inspector General of the Royal Irish Constabulary [T.J. Smith] stated in my presence that he was in daily fear of one of two things, either of wholesale resignations from the force or of his men running amok. Either he said would mean the end of the R.I.C." A large number of RIC men from the south-west were looking for transfers and Greenwood told the British cabinet on 31 May that resignations were running at approximately two hundred per month. During May, June and July 1920 there were 566 resignations from the force.⁵ The recruitment of ex-servicemen to complement the strength of the R.I.C. had been sanctioned at the beginning of 1920 and the first draft arrived in March 1920 and were sent to the most disturbed areas of Munster and Connacht. Because they had to dress partly in khaki, pending the arrival of their uniforms, they became known as the Black and Tans. On 28 April a group of them caused disturbances in Limerick.

This was the day after the I.R.A. attack on Ballylanders R.I.C. barracks which had resulted in the surrender of the R.I.C. garrison and a valuable haul of arms, ammunition and bombs. Despite this haul, the I.R.A. was still poorly equipped, as Michael Quirke recalled in 1928: "Few people realise even to this day how poorly the I.R.A. in the provinces were armed. In our area service rifles were few and far between ... some twenty rifles were scattered through the East Limerick and South Tipperary districts. These were the ones that had been retained and concealed following the countermanding order in 1916."⁶

In the 1940s and early 1950s, the writer and former senior I.R.A. leader, Ernie O'Malley, went round Ireland conducting an extensive series of interviews with ex-I.R.A. men about the War of Independence and the Civil War. He spoke at length with former members of the East, Mid and West Limerick Brigades, among them the Malone brothers, Tomás and Séamus, Garret McAuliffe, Tom Wallace, Ned Cregan, Bill Carty, Bill Fraher, Tom Crawford and David Guerin. They gave O'Malley valuable accounts of the preparations and planning for the attacks on the Ballylanders and Kilmallock barracks. From these accounts it is clear that the Ballylanders attack was to a large extent planned in order to heal the divisions in the East Limerick Brigade between its two senior officers, Donncha O'Hannigan and Liam Manahan. These were due partly to personality clashes but also to Manahan's criticism of I.R.B. influence in the Brigade. Tomás Malone had been sent by Michael Collins to sort out the feud and took charge of the Ballylanders attack which achieved one of its main aims, as he later told Ernie O'Malley: it "finished the Hannigan-Managhan [sic] scrap". It also eased other suspicions within the area, notably regarding Liam Scully who came from Kerry. Tomás Malone told

³ Mainchín Seoighe, The Fenian Attack on Kilmallock Police Barracks, *N. M. A. J.*, vol. x, no. 2, 1967, pp 157-68

⁴ UCD Archives Department, Ernie O'Malley Papers, P17b/129, interview with Bill Fraher.

⁵ Townshend, *op. cit.*, pp.92-7.

⁶ Michael Quirke, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

O'Malley that "a rumour was being circulated that he was a spy. He came to see me about it and he was altogether troubled. I told him of our proposed attack, so he fought with us."⁷ Spies were a major concern at the time and shortly before the attack on Kilmallock, James Dalton, an alleged spy, had been murdered in Limerick. The successful haul of arms and ammunition from the Ballylanders barracks led directly to the attack on Kilmallock with others planned immediately afterwards for Rathkeale and Newcastlewest

Since the Kilmallock attack itself has been described at length by Michael Quirke and Mainchín Seoighe, in their respective publications, and by Tomás Malone, Tom Wallace, Bill Fraher and Tom Crawford in the O'Malley Papers, this article does not propose to go into the details here except to note similarities and discrepancies between the R.I.C. report by D.I. Egan and the various I.R.A. accounts. D.I. Egan's narrative of the attack, based presumably on immediate briefings of the survivors, tallies generally with those of the I.R.A. attackers. But there are major discrepancies, particularly about numbers: the number of I.R.A. men involved in the attack, the number of R.I.C. men in the barracks and the number of R.I.C. and I.R.A. men killed. In its first report on the attack on 31 May the *Limerick Leader* stated that the raiders "are estimated at 400." On 3 June the Conservative M.P. Sir William Davison, questioning Greenwood in the House of Commons about the attack, asked "why no assistance was given to the ten policemen at Kilmallock...who defended their barracks for upwards of five hours ...against a hostile force numbering at least 200 men." These estimates seem to have come from the police but are difficult to accept, not least because of the tactical and logistical problems of moving hundreds of men around a countryside that was already regularly patrolled. The I.R.A. operation was certainly a big one and included men not only from the Limerick Brigades but also from Clare, Tipperary and Cork. However, from the evidence of other accounts subsequently published and from Ernie O'Malley's interviewees, a tentative estimate of between 100-120 seems more realistic.⁸

The question of R.I.C. numbers is a far more intriguing one. D.I. Egan wrote in his report that there were ten men in the barracks, 2 sergeants and 8 constables. Michael Quirke wrote in 1928 that the usual R.I.C. strength at Kilmallock was 2 sergeants and 18 constables although this varied nightly as "individual R.I.C. men came and departed by train on special plain clothes duty. Occasionally they came by Crossley tender, so that it was never possible to say accurately what was the strength of the garrison on a particular night. In point of fact it so happened that on the night of the attack the garrison consisted of twenty-eight men". As to casualties, Quirke wrote at the end of his article that it was well known locally that besides Kane and Morton, "three others were killed and burned beyond recognition in the conflagration of the barracks". Tomás Malone told Ernie O'Malley: "We found skeletons with handcuffs on them. Some of the police said that Sergeant [O'] Sullivan shot them for there were bullet-holes in them, but this is only hearsay. Some women came over from England about their husbands, but it was never definitely known how many police had been killed or burned alive ... [The Tans] were not counted in casualty lists. There had been six or seven of them on our Intelligence list which was given to me but I didn't mention this information to our men for I didn't want the lads to know for fear they might lose heart". Tom Wallace told O'Malley: "Sergeant O'Sullivan locked up five or six R.I.C. who wanted to surrender into the cells, and they were burned to death."⁹ Who were these other casualties? Tomás Malone's reference to women coming over from England, if correct, suggests that they might have been related to recent recruits from Britain. Kane and Morton were both Irish, both

⁷ UCDA O'Malley papers, P17b/106, interview with Tomás Malone.

⁸ Raftery, *op. cit.*, says the number was "about sixty men" but does not give a source for this estimate.

married with families so it would have been difficult to hide their deaths. However, while the strength and persistence of local rumour about the number of casualties is certainly striking, no evidence has yet emerged to prove it conclusively. What is equally striking is the animus against Sergeant O'Sullivan in the subsequent accounts by ex-I.R.A. men for not surrendering, as the Ballylanders barracks had just a month before. The *Limerick Leader* reported on 2 June that "had the raiders known that these men were wounded they would have had a truce, had it been asked, until they were removed to a place of safety." Quirke wrote that the Kilmallock garrison "fought the fight of heroes, and, although we were engaged in a life-and-death struggle with them, we readily acknowledge the magnificent stand they made in the face of an utterly hopeless situation."

The attack had begun either at midnight or at 2.00 a.m., depending on which account one accepts, and ended shortly after 7.00 a.m.¹⁰ Why did reinforcements fail to arrive in time to relieve the garrison? When Greenwood was questioned about this in the House of Commons on 3 June he replied that "the nearest military station to Kilmallock is fifteen miles away. The usual signals were made during the attack but owing to the fact that all the roads were blocked, and the railways torn up, a considerable time elapsed before their arrival."¹¹

What of I.R.A. casualties? Egan wrote in his report that besides Scully, another man was believed to have been killed and that local rumour even put the figures at eight killed and fifteen wounded. But Scully was the only I.R.A. casualty; he was from Glencar, Co Kerry, not Cork as Egan reported. He was buried at Templeglantine cemetery, Co. Limerick and not in Kerry as Quirke apparently believed¹², in what seems to have been a remarkably open and well-attended ceremony. Tomás Malone told Ernie O'Malley that the Flying Column "originated after the funeral of Liam Scully."

Further attacks on R.I.C. barracks at Newcastlewest and Rathkeale were planned immediately after Kilmallock but these did not happen because, as Tomás Malone and others told Ernie O'Malley, they had used up too much ammunition during the Kilmallock attack. Malone recalled receiving a reprimand for this from Gearóid O'Sullivan, the IRA Adjutant General. Another deterrent was the armoured car which the British army placed outside the Newcastlewest barracks immediately after the events at Kilmallock. In Kilmallock itself fears of reprisals were soon realised with the burning of the People's Hall the night after the attack. There were also attacks on the houses of those believed to be Sinn Féin sympathisers.

As Egan noted in his report, it proved impossible to find a jury and each of the absent jurors was fined £2. The police and army commandeered a large house belonging to Mr Roger Fox to replace the destroyed barracks. The funerals of Sergeant Kane and Constable Morton were reported in the *Limerick Leader* on 31 May. Kane's funeral took place in Maryborough [Portlaoise] but Morton, who was married to a local woman, was buried in Kilmallock. The paper reported a "strange incident" when Morton's hearse reached Wolfe Tone Street. "Here the horses sulked, and no efforts could induce them to move further. The coffin was then taken from the hearse and borne on the shoulders of policemen and soldiers to the cemetery." After the funerals the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, told the House of Commons on 10 June that "the gallant conduct of all members of the Royal Irish Constabulary in defending their barracks at Kilmallock...against a prolonged and determined attack

⁹ *Ibid.* P17b/124, interview with Tom Wallace.

¹⁰ Quirke says midnight, Egan stated 2.00 a.m.

¹¹ House of Commons Debates, vol. 129 col. 2077, 3 June 1920.

¹² Quirke, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

by a large number of raiders, has been fully considered by the Constabulary Review Board. Each of the members of the force concerned has been awarded the Constabulary medal, which is only granted in cases of pre-eminent valour and bravery. They have each been promoted to high rank in the force and have also been awarded favourable records and money grants from the Review Board.”¹³ This meant that Sergeant O’Sullivan was promoted to District Inspector, while the constables were promoted to the rank of sergeant. The new D.I. O’Sullivan did not enjoy his promotion long: he was murdered in Listowel on 20 January 1921. D.I. Egan left Ireland when he was appointed Chief Constable of Stockport in August 1920.

Political events after the Kilmallock attack demonstrated that the War of Independence was entering a new phase. Polling for the local elections in the Kilmallock electoral area took place on 8 June. The four candidates elected were all Sinn Féin. When the Kilmallock Rural Council met at the end of June it pledged allegiance to Dáil Éireann. The motion, the *Limerick Leader* reported on 23 June, was “unanimously adopted.”

Appendix

TELEGRAM RECEIVED IN THE IRISH OFFICE

Handed in at: Dublin Castle

Date: 31 May 1920

From: Under Secy.

The Inspector General R.I.C. reports this day as follows:

Kilmallock Co Limerick.

28th May 1920

I regret to report that on the morning of 28th instant Kilmallock R.I.C. Barrack was attacked with fatal results to two of my men. The Barrack was held by two Sergeants and eight Constables. At 2 am the police noticed people being cleared out of houses opposite the Barrack. All men immediately got to their posts and immediately the Barrack was attacked on all sides by Rifle fire Bombs shot guns etc to which they spiritedly replied. A Call to Surrender was answered by a defiant ‘Never’. About a quarter of an hour after the opening of the attack Constable Moreton was fatally wounded but continued to fight. The attacking party while continuing to fire bored a hole through the roof of an adjacent house through which they threw half a hundred weights making thereby a hole in the roof of the Barrack in the Northern End. Through this aperture they threw paraffin oil in bottles which they took from a full cylinder belonging to the American Oil Company. They also threw Balls made of Sulphur saturated with paraffin oil which made the defenders very ill. A fierce fire was concentrated into the Windows of the Barrack from houses opposite and also from the garden hedge at the rear. While the fight continued Sergt. Keane was seriously wounded but all continued the fight with great determination and courage. Their fire at the attacking party was well directed and indicates cool determination to resist. Repeated calls to Surrender were answered by equally vigorous refusals. About 3 am the whole of the Northern End of the Barrack was enveloped in flames but the defenders

¹³ House of Commons Debates, vol. 129, col. 2077, 3 June 1920. Details of the careers of these R.I.C. men can be found in Jim Herlihy’s book *The Royal Irish Constabulary: A Short History and Genealogical Guide*, Dublin 1997. There are slight discrepancies in the spelling of the names. In Egan’s report and the contemporary press accounts Sergeant Kane appears as Sergeant Keane but Kane is the name on the official record so it is used in this article. D.I. Egan appears as Michael J. A. Egan in Herlihy’s book although he clearly signs himself W.A. Egan in his report.

retired gradually to the other end and maintained a steady defence with all weapons at their disposal. The Barrack burned freely. The floors collapsed bringing with them the living and the dead men. The gallant garrison continued in this way until 7.15 am when the Barrack became untenable and the Sergt. followed by his bruised and wounded Comrades emerged with fixed bayonets prepared to die.

At this stage Constable Hoey was shot in the back and collapsed. The attackers then withdrew. The barrack was by this time a Complete ruin. The following Casualties were sustained by the police: Sergt. Thomas Keane, wounded and died in the flames. Constable Joseph P. Moreton, killed, his body being consumed in the fire. Constable Hoey, dangerously wounded. Constables Barry, Hall, Bailey, Holmes, Sullivan, Feeley and Sergeant O'Sullivan who was in command of the Barrack were all slightly wounded.

The attacking party had casualties, a man believed to be a Sinn Fein Organizer named Scully of Newmarket Co Cork killed. This man was attended by Doctor Macnamara and died in ten minutes after being hit his body being removed in a motor car. Another man believed to be Barry of Bottomstown Knocklong who was shot in the Barrack Yard and removed by his comrades. This man is believed to be dead but I have not had time to confirm this.

In addition to blood was found under the windows of two distinct houses facing the Barrack and the remains of the clothing of another man probably blown to pieces by the accidental explosion of two of his own Bombs at the Southern side of the Courthouse where the attacking party apparently had one of their Dumps.

Owing to the Police fire being so good I feel confident that there other casualties amongst the attacking party. There is an unconfirmed local rumour that eight were killed and fifteen wounded.

The Coroner summoned a jury to hold inquests on the remains of the two dead Police but only four responded and he adjourned the inquest until later this morning. In the event of the jurors not turning [up] I propose carrying out the burial.

Compensation has been claimed in respect of the deaths of both police by the relatives and for the demolition of the Barrack by me.

It is interesting to note the V shaped iron shutters erected in 1867 on the barrack withstood the mk 7 ammunition while the flat plate recently erected did not. No arms ammunition or public property was lost to the raiders but on the contrary bombs of various sizes and some live ammuniton were left by the attacking party. I cannot conclude this report without paying the highest possible tribute I can to the gallantry of the men who fought and died and bled in defence of this barrack. Every man fought well with the greatest determination coolness and courage and their magnificent defence has received the highest commendation of Military Officers of every rank who have since visited the scene.

The last charge into the open with the bayonet is worthy of our service and in particular I wish to bring under notice of the Inspector General for immediate reward the great bravery determination and able leadership as well as the fine spirit of defiance of Sergt. Tobias O'Sullivan who so successfully maintained the honour of the R.I.C. on this occasion.

Sgd. W.A. Egan Dist. Inspector
Royal Irish Constabulary

House of Lords Records Office
David Lloyd George Papers Ref: F/19/2/11