

Rescue and death of Bobby Byrnes

TWENTY-Eight year old Robert (Bobby) Byrnes was Adjutant of the Limerick City Second Brigade of the Irish Volunteers and in the spring of 1919 was arrested and sentenced to 12 months imprisonment for being in possession of firearms. He was an employee of the local General Post Office and was one of several officials who worked there who had come under the notice of the R.I.C. for their connection with the independence movement. The post office authorities, fully aware of Byrnes' IRA activities, waited their chance to dismiss him and this came when he attended the funeral of Limerick volunteer, John Daly.

Byrnes, who lived with his mother and father in the Town Hall Cottage, tucked into the base of the old walls of Limerick opposite St. John's Hospital, was arrested when his house was raided on 13 January, 1919, and a revolver and ammunition was found thereon.

Conditions in Limerick Jail were extremely harsh with solitary confinement and jailers' rough treatment of Republican prisoners were the order of the day. Despite several protests, including one from the Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Denis Hallinan, and the Limerick Trades Council, there was no alleviation of the prisoners' plight and following a riot in the prison, which was brutally suppressed, a hunger strike was organised, led by Byrnes.

Eventually, with his health deteriorating from the hunger strike, Byrnes was removed to The Union, or City Workhouse, and the I.R.A. decided that a rescue attempt would be affected. The prisoner was guarded by six R.I.C. men, and a large party of the I.R.A. descended on the Workhouse on Sunday afternoon, April 6, 1919.

A whistle was blown,

which was to signal the attack, and what was to follow was described in a headline in the Limerick *Leader* on the following day, Monday, April 7: "Limerick Sensation: Daring Daylight Rescue. Police Constable Fatally Shot and Four Others Injured. Political Prisoner succumbs to Injuries."

In the shooting that followed the rescue attempt, Constable O'Brien, a native of Birr, was shot dead and Constable Spillane, from Loughrea, was seriously injured, but survived. Spillane had thrown himself across Byrnes in the bed as he tried to rise and was shot from close range.

The hunger-striker was to have been spirited away in a mourning carriage belonging to a local undertaker but through a misunderstanding the vehicle waited at the back of the Union while Byrnes, badly wounded in the affray, waited with his comrades at the front. Eventually the party went towards Hassett's Cross and stopped a passing pony and trap belonging to a John Ryan of Knockalisheen and Byrnes was brought to his cottage in Meelick where he succumbed to his wounds that evening.

It was estimated that 15,000 mourners attended the funeral of Byrnes which took place from the cottage in which he died to St. John's Cathedral. The Limerick *Leader* headline ran: "Late Mr. R. J. Byrnes, Striking Tribute of Sorrow and Respect. Impressive Procession to Mount St. Laurence Cemetery. Signs of Mourning on Every Side. Elaborate Military Precautions."

The agitation and unrest that was to follow Byrnes' death was eventually to lead to martial law in the city and a general strike organised by the Limerick Trades Council which was to lead to the formation of the Limerick Soviet.

Lusitania is sunk

THE horrors of the war were brought nearer home with the sinking of the Lusitania off the coast of Cork on May 7th, 1915. Two Limerick people miraculously sur-

vived the sinking: Patrick Hanly of Lisnagry who had harrowing stories to tell of the sinking, and Mrs. Cox, who lived in America.

While the casualty list reached a dreadful

1,924 lives lost, heading in on column articles in the *Chronicle* reported that "Mr. Var (the American millionaire) feared lost." The returned a ve-



A typical Limerick city family who survived the War years in the e Row, c. 1913. From left, May Long, May Fitzgerald (nee Bourke), V Fitzgerald, Jack Fitzgerald (2nd child), William Fitzgerald.

Effect of t War in Li

AS in the first decade of the century, war made most of the headlines in the *Leader* and *Chronicle* in the second. The Great War (1914-1918) took up by far most of the space of the Limerick *Chronicle* of that period with exten-

cut off a regiment of Horse Artillery. It was one of the finest deeds I ever saw. Not one of the poor lads got away alive."

A letter published from the front by a soldier to his mother in Limerick (not named) graphically illustrated the horrors: "All night long the cries of the wounded and dying are very distressing to hear."

lady, who was in the South of Writing to her according to the cle, she said tha wounded Belg diers were broug convent to be t by the nuns. tales they hav They say the chi to be pitied ov some of them h eyes out, and mans go so far

Belgian refugees arrive in Limerick