

Crime on the Shannon Scheme

by Michael McCarthy

The opening ceremony of the Shannon Scheme was performed by President William T. Cosgrave on Monday, June 22, 1929, at Parteen Villa, O'Brien's Bridge, Co. Clare. During the next few months water was syphoned from the Shannon and slowly passed through the sluice gates into the head-race in preparation for the generation of electricity at Ardnacrusha. (1) By the end of August construction work on the tail-race was completed. (2) In September the giant turbines were tested. (3) On October 21, 1929, those areas of the Saor Stat which were adequately wired to receive electricity did so. (4) Gradual scaling down of the construction works followed and employment was reduced from 5,000 men to 2,000. (5) And with the drop in employment figures went a commensurate drop in the crime rate associated with the scheme which at one time almost dominated the business of Killaloe, Limerick and Ennis courts. Bertrand Russell may have been correct when he wrote that "criminals, in the legal sense, seldom have much influence on the course of history...", but there is no doubt that records of their appearance in court frequently tell us more about history and social circumstance than the philosophers and historians bothered to document.

One of the earliest reported cases associated with the scheme concerned a group of eighteen German engineers, scientists, electricians and servants living in Doonass House. The majority of the 500 Germans working at Ardnacrusha lived nearby in wooden houses and huts. They had their own German school run by Herr Stumer; they also had their own religious services which were conducted by Rev. Jupp from Roscrea. (6) The group at Doonass had a rather exclusive arrangement and it must have been with a genuine sense of culture shock that on June, 12, 1926, they received a summons from the local gardai under the Sheebening Act. Over 1,400 bottles of German wines (then valued at £700) were seized.

A month later the case was heard at Limerick County District Court. Baron Graneritz, a high executive of Siemens Schuckert, one of the contractors building the scheme, gave evidence. He stated that all of the drink belonged to Siemens which had taken over Doonass House for its employees. He told the court that there were two cellars, one for



Timber for the Shannon Scheme being unloaded at the Limerick Docks on September 1925.

residents and one for German callers. Acting District Justice Conroy did not have much mercy on the Germans as he ordered that all drink be confiscated, and that a fine of £10 be imposed on Ernest Fiege, the mess steward, for selling liquor without a licence on March 1, 1926, and on the day of the raid. (7)

Another case which reportedly caused a certain amount of amusement and revelry among the navvies on the site concerned a consignment of Murphy's stout which went astray. The consignment, meant for Anselm Taylor, a caterer in one of the canteens at Ardnacrusha and subsequently the owner of a pub in O'Brien's Bridge, disappeared from Longpavement station having been collected in a lorry by someone other than Taylor. The latter then brought an action against Great Southern Railways and was awarded £25 compensation by Judge McElligott

in Limerick Circuit Court on June 12. (8) Folk memory in the district has it that it was one of the "wettest" summers ever.

At this stage work at Ardnacrusha was hardly a year old but already the courts were feeling the pressure of the increasing crime rate. One justice commented that "the area is becoming very troublesome". On a broader front, the Government was also concerned. It was worried not because of petty crime but because of threats to the security of the scheme itself. On January 26, 1926, representatives of the departments of Defence, of Industry and Commerce, and the Board of Works met and recommended military protection of a permanent nature, including a barracks for 300 men at Ardnacrusha, a detachment of airforce and two planes, a military post for 25 men at O'Brien's Bridge, anti-aircraft guns and a number of blockhouses in strategic positions. (9) Six months later

Mr. E.J. Duggan, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance, stated that it was proposed to acquire three-and-a-half acres of land, including a farmhouse, at Ardnacrusha for the purpose of housing 250 troops of all ranks as a protective force for the power station and also to house 50 troops at the weir as a protection post. Estimated cost of this undertaking would be £41,500. (10)

On August 25 Mr P. Hughes, the Minister for Defence, and Lieutenant General McMahon, Chief of Staff G.H.Q. and Col. Higgins, acquired a site for the proposed military barracks. (11) But the elaborate defence plans never materialised as the cost proved prohibitive. By 1928 the new barracks idea was eventually abandoned, the planes literally never got off the ground, and the house which had been bought for the officers was sold. Security of the works was left to a much more modest military force and to a handful of gardai, who when all is said and done, coped effectively. The latter group were housed in a rather dilapidated premises rented to the Board of Works by Miss Helen Ryan at £10 per annum and in a hut which was built on an adjoining plot.

(12) Gardai also had to suffer hut accommodation in Clonlara. (13)

While the Shannon Scheme may have been looked on by many as a "Free Stater" project making the Government of the day much more sensitive to security, in theory at least, there was, in retrospect, little direct threat to the scheme itself. Even when the massive storage depot at Longpavement went up in flames there was no major stepping up of security subsequently. The authorities readily accepted that the fire was not the work of saboteurs.

While larceny of food, clothes, bicycles and tools was by far the most common crime on the scheme, occasionally it took more serious proportions. For example, in November, 1928, John Hogan, John O'Neill and Ed Toomey appeared in Ennis District Court for attempting to rob £2,000 from the pay office at Ardtoggle, O'Brien's Bridge. The robbery had been planned in the disused Blackwater Mill but they were captured by gardai before they had completed the job. (14) Another hold-up which ended in failure was that conducted by Terence Connolly and James Kelly, employees on the scheme. Armed and masked they held up the mail motor car at Kilmore, Broad-

ford, in November, 1927, robbing £100 and the car which they later abandoned at Hassett's Cross, Meelick. Subsequently they were captured and brought to trial. (15)

Some appearances in court were the direct result of the economic conditions under which the workers lived. Daniel Flynn of Tipperary, a labourer at Ardnacrusha, was brought before Justice Troy at Tipperary District Court by Great Southern Railways for travelling from Oola to Limerick on October 10, 1927 without a ticket, worth 2/8. He explained to the court that working on the scheme he did not earn enough to buy a ticket. He made £1 for a three-day week in bad weather. He sent 5/- a week to his mother. After paying for his digs he had nothing left. He was given a 5/- fine with 20/- costs. (16)

One of the most amusing but subsequently tragic cases was that of another worker from Co. Monaghan, Thomas Whiteside. Having gone to Limerick for a few drinks on a Saturday evening in November, 1926 he posed as a special branch detective and told a motorist to clean the identification plate of his car and if he did not he would hand him over to the next guard that came along. But



A Sean Keating watercolour of the construction of the Shannon Scheme.

the car owner was the first to get in touch with the police and Whiteside was arrested and brought to William Street barracks. He was accidentally killed at the Shannon Scheme works two weeks later, the first to be electrocuted there. (17)

With 500 Germans largely controlling the 5,000 Irish labour force it was inevitable that racial friction would occasionally make the courts, but not as often as one might expect. There was the case of German foremen being assaulted by Irish navvies and of guards being attacked by razor-wielding Germans but none demonstrated the anomalies of the situation better than a case in Killaloe District Court on April 21, 1928. (18) It concerned three Germans, one charged with drunkenness and the other two with falsely representing themselves as bona fide travellers. Only one admitted to having "a leedle English" but managed to translate for the other two. The justice asked if the summonses were translated into German before being served. Superinten-

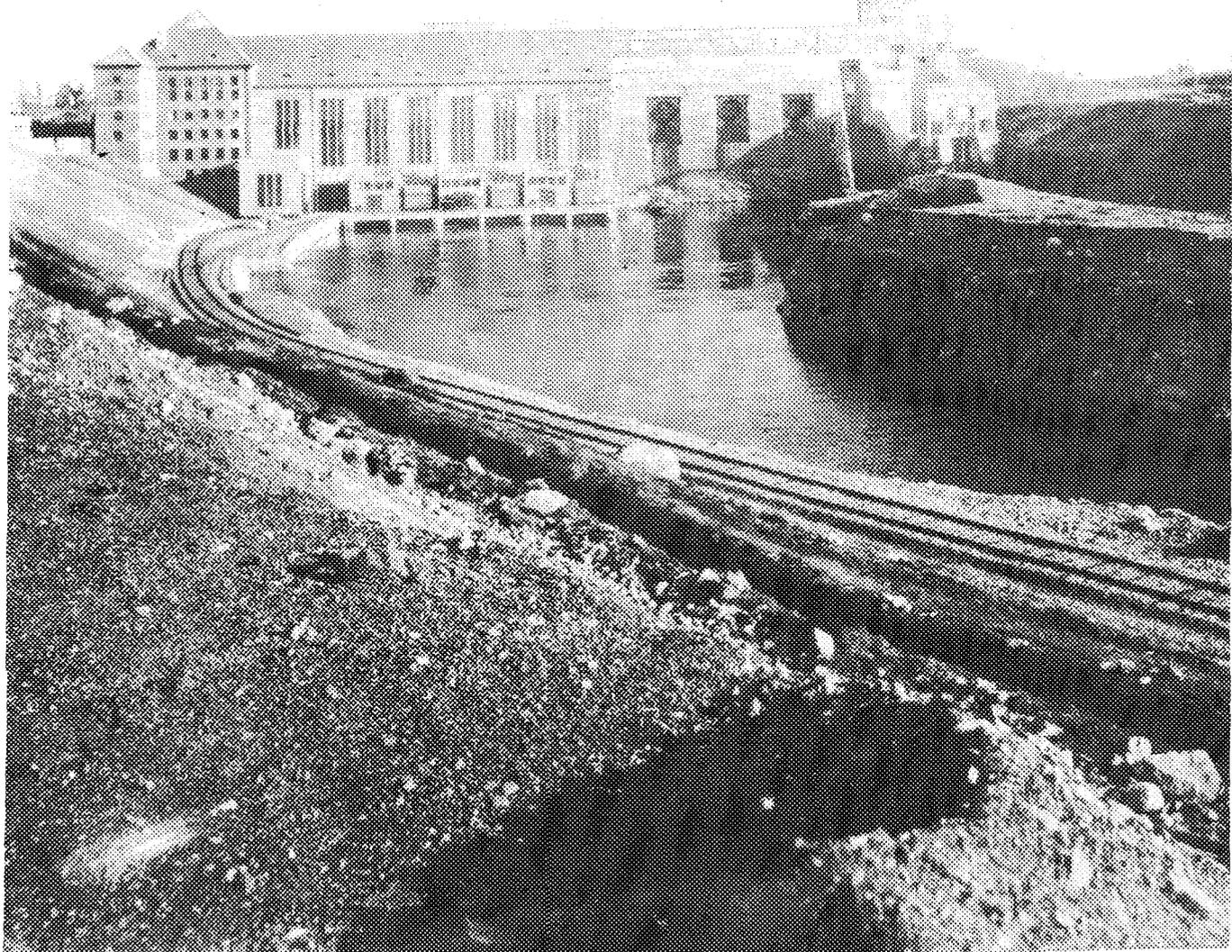
dent Mooney replied that all aliens were supposed to know either Irish or English once they were admitted to the Free State and that they had to sign their names either in Irish or English on admission. The gentleman charged with being drunk conveyed to the court that he had had only "a leedle" and less English. By all accounts he did seem to have tremendous difficulty in following proceedings and kept repeating "trunkenheit", "nein". But when the judge fined him 5/- he produced two half-crowns without the slightest hint from the amateur interpreter! (19)

But language was a problem for not only the Germans. The men from West Galway and from the Aran Islands stuck very much to themselves on the scheme and conducted their business through Irish. The first Connemaraman on the Shannon Scheme to be brought to court was Edward O'Loughlin who was charged with stealing 30/- from another workman and for assaulting him. The judge commented that he was the first Irish speaker to come before him and

asked the garda to translate. O'Loughlin was fined £4 for stealing and 5/- for assault. (20)

The fact that the Connemaramen did not mix much with men from other counties and that they were unable to speak English made them the butt of many jokes. Eventually the men from the West got tired of being ridiculed and on Sunday night, September 4, 1927, they decided to set matters straight and to take the law into their own hands. (21) Led by John MacDonagh of Lettermore about 40 of them went on the rampage in Clonlara. A bottle was sent flying through a window and that signalled the start of proceedings. The MacDonagh brothers, the Flahertys and the Mannions, armed with sticks, stones and other missiles, attacked the occupants of other huts. They smashed everything before them and when the dust settled two people had to be hospitalised, a large number were treated for minor injuries and there were 14 arrests.

It was only with the help of the gardai



Ardnacrusha Power Station.

from O'Brien's Bridge that the Clonlara police eventually restored order. That night 14 men were brought to Limerick County jail in an open truck reminiscent of Black and Tan times. Subsequently in the District Court evidence was given by the other workers against the attackers to the effect that the Connemaramen did a lot of overtime which caused jealousy, that they were looked on as uncivilized for their lack of English, and that they were an unwashed, dirty lot. Both Mac-Donaghs were fined £2 and the others were fined £1 each for causing bodily injury and damage to property. (22)

Perhaps there was no other issue of the Shannon Scheme which caused so much aggravation between the Government and private individuals, both in and out of court, as that of land compensation. Even the wags of Browne's pub had it summed up:

"On the green banks of Shannon
Since Siemens came nigh,
No poor Irish farmer is happy - and
why?
The Government to them compensa-
tion won't pay
They've even lost faith in their old
friend J.J." (23)

Justice Flood had more than a point when on July 2 1928 in Limerick Civil Bill Court, when the Land Commission had brought an action against John Daly of Ardtaggle in respect of annuities, he indicated that the situation was crazy where one Government department took land without compensation while another sued for annuities.

Numerous farmers were brought through the courts for failing to pay annuities even though the land was either gone altogether or of no use to them while construction work continued. A clear case of live horse to get grass. Initially compensation was to be awarded under the Acquisition of Land Assessment of Compensation Act of 1919. (25) Subsequently the Shannon Electricity Act of 1925 was introduced in the Dail and provided under Section 6 for the establishment of an Arbitration Court to settle claims. It was never used while the scheme was being built. (26)

The procedure adopted by the Department of Industry and Commerce in acquiring property for the Shannon Scheme was quite lengthy. Particulars of the property to be acquired were first furnished to the valuer, Mr. Taylor, and to the Chief State Solicitor. The valuer then visited the locality and reported as to the measure of compensation to be paid for the rights to the land. Taylor's reports were then forwarded to the Department of Finance for consent in the payment of compensation.

In the meantime the Chief State Solicitor examined the question of title. Assuming that the Department of Finance agreed with the proposal of the Department of Industry and Commerce,

the Chief State Solicitor would then advise the latter department as to whether or not it should go ahead and buy the property. Local solicitors were refusing to provide him with any information on title because they saw that he was not in a position to indicate that he was prepared to pay the going rate for land. Besides, serious complaints were being made to the Government by farmers who had decided to co-operate because of the delay in making cash settlements. (27) Three years later farmers were still suffering, on the one hand, because of inordinate delays in processing claims and, on the other, because they were paraded by the Government in front of judges in an attempt to squeeze money which they did not have out of them. Even the judges complained; politicians ranted and raved in the Dail, and while it would be untrue to say that the Government remained unmoved neither did it attempt to refine the plethora of red tape and bureaucracy which would have led to a speeding up of the process.

Just two months before the official opening of the scheme one of its saddest and tragic chapters was closed - a former employee was hanged for murder. On Friday, December 21, 1928 a Bavarian foreman, Jacob Kunz of Ardnacrusha was struck by an assailant with an iron bar at Parteen-a-lax while returning from Limerick. He died a short time afterwards. An ex-soldier, from Limerick, who formerly worked with Kunz, was later charged with the murder and robbery of £80-10-0 from the Bavarian's pocket and of £409-10-00 which he had sewn on his vest. (28) The accused was charged in Limerick District Court on Saturday, December 29 and was remanded until January 15, 1929. In the meantime the money was found under a stone in Corbally. The case was heard in Dublin Central Criminal Court on March 11. After 4 days trial the jury found him guilty and he was sentenced to hang on April 11. (29) The sentence was appealed but after a very strenuous campaign by his family to have him reprieved it was made to stand. He was hanged on Thursday, April 25. (30)

An interesting outcome of the case was that in the Court of Criminal Appeal when the hearing of the application for leave to appeal was made, the Chief Justice, referring to the matter of police interrogation and of taking statements from suspects, said that the fundamental principle is that no one is to be compelled to incriminate himself. Justice Hanna, with reference to a remark of counsel for the Attorney General that detection was the province of the police, said that it was true that much crime might go unpunished if statements taken by the police were not made available, but that in the interest of the accused there should be a peace commissioner or some responsible person present during any interrogation or when he was required to make a statement. (31) His

remarks qualified for the then current issue of the **Irish Law Times** and, in retrospect, not without reason.

The scaling down of employment on the scheme was marked by a rash of larcenies as men prepared to go home and many determined not to go empty-handed. Yet at that stage the courts had become accustomed to hearing the names of The Huts, O'Brien's Bridge, The Huts, Ardnacrusha, Parteen and Clonlara, as addresses and the only consolation was that within a few weeks they would hardly ever hear them again ... at least, in relation to crime.

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