Four Limerick City Republican Memorials

by Des Long

There are four Republican memorials in Limerick City, and many see three of these every day. The fourth, however, is not yet on public view, and many citizens are not aware of its existence. The first three are situated in various locations around the city, while the fourth is in Sarsfield Military Barracks. The other monuments can be seen in the following places, and all are situated close to the place where these patriots, whom they commemorate, made the supreme sacrifice for Irish freedom. The first is on the Dublin Road at Castletroy Cross, the second is on St Patrick's Hill and the third is on the Ballysimon Road near the railway bridge.

None of these three memorials are dated, so it is understandable why many, particularly young people, are unaware of their significance. I have been asked over the years for an explanation and history of these memorials. I will endeavour in this article to outline a short history of them.

John Collopy Memorial at Castletroy Cross, Dublin Road

On Saturday night 3 April 1920, IRA GHQ ordered a coordinated strike against the Crown Forces. Throughout Ireland, IRA units attacked and destroyed many unoccupied RIC barracks and Income Tax offices. Reporting in the daily papers, the Irish Times stated that ‘sixty police barracks and huts were destroyed.’ It also continued: ‘Twenty-two income tax offices were fired and robbed.’ The Irish Independent stated that one hundred and fifty barracks were destroyed and that in Limerick city and county eighteen RIC barracks out of a total of fifty-one had been destroyed.6

The Limerick Leader put the total number of barracks destroyed at 157, and it also stated that: ‘in all the Tax Offices visited, official documents and valuable documents bearing on Income Tax were destroyed.’ In its report the Limerick Chronicle stated: ‘The barracks at Herbertstown is stated to have been blown up with gelignite and other barracks burned or partially destroyed on Saturday night included Eton, Grange, Ballyneety, Pallaskenry, Kildimo, Loughill, Parteen, Callen, Kilmurry, Kilmerney, Slattery, Ardfinnan, Ballysimon, Ashtown, Broadford and Strand near Newcastle West.’

The attacks and destruction of these barracks were not achieved without a cost. The Limerick IRA leadership ordered that B Company, City Battalion, was to destroy Kilmurry Barracks at Castletroy as part of the coordinated attacks. The unit took over the barracks and spread flammable material in around the premises. Just as the unit set the building alight, two Volunteers, John Collopy and Dennis (Dimmy) Mahon, spotted a statue of the Blessed Virgin inside, and they rushed in to save it. They were trapped inside, and as a result both were severely burned. Their comrades pulled them out of the burning building and brought them to St John's Hospital for treatment.

At that time, the Matron in the hospital was Martha O'Donnell from Ballyneety, a woman with strong Republican sympathies, and she ensured that they were treated for their burns and were not reported to the British authorities. Danny Maher was maimed for life as a consequence. He died on Christmas Day 1963 after nearly fifty years of suffering for the part he played in that phase of the fight for Irish freedom. Volunteer John Collopy from Pennywell, who was more severely burned, was to linger for nine months and died in St John's Hospital on the 15 December 1920. John was a strong Republican with a great love for all things Irish. He was one of those who served on the committee of St Patrick's GAA club and had a great love for Gaelic games. He was captain of the team that beat Sarsfields by 8-3 to 2-3 to win the 1915 Junior Hurling League Final. The officers who guided the fortunes of St Patrick's were Chairman, J. Collogy; Vice Chairman and Vice Captain, P Madden; Secretary, Mick Murphy; Assistant Secretary, T. Dillon-Harigan.

He was buried in St Patrick's Cemetery after 3 o'clock Mass at St John's Cathedral. His comrades later erected the memorial close to the spot, where Kilmurry Barracks, Castletroy stood and where he received the burns that led to his untimely death.

Henry Clancy Memorial on the Ballysimon Road

Early in 1921, C Company of the Second Battalion Limerick City IRA loaned two volunteers to A Company for an operation that they were to carry out. On Sunday 1 May 1921, Thomas Keane Captain of C Company had an appointment at 3:30 pm to meet Captain Terence Casey OC of A Company in Ballysimon to return the volunteers. Keane, who was a 34 year old married man, was accompanied by Henry Clancy to the rendezvous. Clancy and Keane as well as being active IRA members and despite a wide age disparity were also very close friends and workmates.

On arrival at Ballysimon, they met Casey as arranged and, having secured the two empty revolvers, they were returning across the fields towards the railway, when a number of Crossley Tenders and cage cars with heavily armed RIC men appeared on the main road, travelling in the direction of the IRA men. Terence Casey was able to make good his escape, while Keane and Clancy lay down in the grass thinking that they would not be spotted. However, they had already been spotted and were arrested by the RIC patrol, which was under the command of the notorious Sergeant James Moran.

They were placed under guard in one of the tenders, where their guards taunted them. At some point, Clancy perceiving that those guarding him were distracted he
The inscription on the monument reads:

1 milt - cùimh
Aonraí Mhic Fhlainncha
Dubhna - Oirencé
Complát C. Cac.
Ógláis na hÉireann
21 Bhliadhna básis

Translation:
In loving memory of
Henry Clancy,
Company Officer, C Company,
Limerick City.
The Irish Volunteers.
21 years of age.

Michael Downey Memorial on St Patrick's Hill Road

When Henry Clancy's funeral procession was broken up by the actions of the RIC and other detachments of the Crown Forces, many of those wishing to attend were so infuriated that they decided to make their way to the cemetery by another route. It led to groups, mainly of young men, attempting to bypass the military and police cordon and get to Mount St Lawrence Graveyard in advance of the police by going up through Garrivoe.16

Some of those taking this circular route to the graveyard were again confronted near the Fairgreen by another contingent of police, under the command of D J John Greally. The notorious Sergeant James Horan had also joined this cordon. When confronted, most of the young men got away.

The police then gave chase to a small group, which consisted of Frank Guerin of Margaret Place, Gerald Noonan of Military Road (O'Connell Avenue), and Michael Downey of Riebogue.17 The police claimed that they called on the group to stop, but only Frank Guerin obeyed the command. The RIC then opened fire on Downey and Noonan. Both were seen to fall, and when the police reached them, they were already dead, and the other man was unconscious. At that time, the RIC believed that both were dead.

Father T J McNamara, who was performing the burial service for Henry Clancy, broke off the service and left the graveyard and went to administer the last rites to the two young men, amid a hail of bullets. The two bodies of Downey and Noonan were then thrown into the back of a Crossley Tender and conveyed to the morgue in the New Barracks. Afterwards, the priest returned to the graveyard and concluded the funeral service of Henry Clancy.

Meanwhile, Michael Downey's corpse and Gerald Noonan lay on slabs in the morgue in the New Barracks. During the night, when an orderly was going through his rounds, he was amazed to hear moans coming from the interior of the dead house. The guard turned out, and medical officers, who removed the sheets, revealed Gerard Noonan coming out of a glazed shaper. Only grazed by a bullet, he had been left for dead and covered up alive beside the corpse of Michael Downey.18

In an effort to cover up the murder committed at the funeral, Dublin Castle issued the following announcement on the evening of 4 May 1921.

During the progress of a funeral of a Sinn Feiner in Limerick to-day the police observed a number of suspicious-looking men making for the country by a circuitous route. On seeing the police the men fled across the country and were followed for a considerable distance. The police called upon them repeatedly to halt, and the order being disregarded, opened fire upon the men. Two of them, Michael Downey, of Singland, Limerick, and George Noonan,
The inscription on the monument reads:

I níol- cumin
Rádraig Mhíchil Ul Maolaimhnaígh Ógláic.
Complac B. Caol Luminige.
Ógláic na nAtharna.

Translation:
In loving memory of
Patrick Michael Downey,
Volunteer, B Company,
Limerick City.
The Irish Volunteers.

of Limerick, were seriously wounded.
Downey has since died of his wounds.
Two loaded revolvers were found on
the line of retreat.15

George Noonan later made a full recovery
from his wounds. The body of Michael
Downey was buried in the Republican plot
in Mount St Lawrence Cemetery. When
Limerick Corporation built the Killaloe
housing scheme in 1936, one of the streets
was named Downey Street in memory of
this brave Volunteer. It was on this Street
that Helena Keane (Tom Keane's widow)
lived, when she and her children moved
from Moore's Lane in 1936.

Thomas Keane Memorial
in Sarsfield Barracks

Thomas Keane, who was arrested at the
same time as Henry Clancy, was 34 years
of age, having been born 28 February 1887.
His father, a carpenter, was also Thomas,
and his mother's name was Johanna.
He had an older sister, Margaret, and a
younger brother, Daniel. The family lived
for a time in Bonfield Lane. Later after his
father's death, they moved to 35 Clare
Street. He served his time to the carpentry
trade and was employed as such with the
Great Southern and Western Railway.

On 15 February 1914, he was married
to a close neighbour, Helena O'Sullivan of
3 Clare Street. After his wedding, he took
up residence at Moore's Lane, where his
widowed mother lived with them. At the
time of his arrest, they had two children;
a girl named Margaret, a son Charles and
Helena was also expecting their third child.

This child, a son, was born 24 Sep-
ember 1921, four months after his father's
execution and was baptised in St John’s
Cathedral the following Sunday and was
christened Thomas in memory of his
father. When Limerick Corporation built
the Killaloe housing estate in 1936, they
named one of the streets Keane Street in

his memory. It was in this estate that his
wife Helena was to live out the remainder
of her life.

On Saturday 14 May 1921, the field
general court-martial on Thomas (Tom)
Keane was held in the New Barracks. He
was charged with levying war and being
improperly in charge of arms at Sallaghy
on 1 May. This trial was held over two days.
Keane pleaded not guilty and was repre-
sented by Mr P Lynch K C and Mr R J
Kinahan, who were instructed by Mr J H
Moran, solicitor. In evidence, reported in
the Limerick Leader:

A police sergeant stated that police
were proceeding from Limerick to
Ballysaimon escorted by an armoured
car; when within a couple of hundred
yards from Sallaghy railway bridge, wit-
nesses saw a number of people running
between some cottages and the railway
line; they ran from the bridge direction.
While the police were searching the
area, fire was opened from behind the
cottages, and the police returned the
fire. Witnesses could not distinguish
any of those who fired on the police;
two civilians surrendered the accused
and the late Henry Clancy.26

A police constable in his evidence stated:
‘that he saw the accused and another man
running towards a bush; he could not
recognise who fired. The next thing he saw
was the accused and another man throw
revolvers into the bush. The witness
approached the men, and a sergeant picked
the revolvers out of the bush. Both revol-
vers were loaded.”27 When questioned by
Mr Lynch for the defence, the witness re-
plied: ‘The lorries were about four hundred
yards away, when he saw the men running.
He was three-quarter way up the laneway,
when he was fired at from the direction of
the railway. He admitted that there was a
good deal of cover for men operating in the
direction of the bridge, and they would
have a good chance of getting away.”28

Inscription on memorial to Captain Thomas Keane
in Sarsfield Barracks

CAPT. THOMAS KEANE
‘C’ COY. 2ND. BN.
MID LIMERICK BDE. I.R.A.
EXECUTED BY BRITISH
FORCES 4-6-1921
AGE 30 YRS.
R.I.P.
On 17 May, the trial resumed, and Mr Lynch, the defence lawyer for Thomas Keane, stated in his opening remarks:

It was hardly necessary to say that they recognised the gravity of the charges against him. With regard to the first charge, that of levying war, he submitted that it was not only not substantiated but negatived. To sustain a capital charge of that nature there must be evidence of a number of people consenting for the object of attacking, killing, or maiming. Council had seen the locusts and was convinced it did not coincide with the evidence given by the witnesses for the prosecution. Instead of substantiating the first charge, it was negative by the testimony given, and he asked for an acquittal on it. Dealing with the second charge, council said he would let the accused tell his own story, and he would make no comment on it.23

The accused in evidence stated: “On the day in question, he met the deceased, Henry Clancy, at the bridge in Singland. There was never a company at the bridge that day but Clancy, himself and a third party who had a revolver. He did not know if the revolver was loaded when he took it. At that moment, the lorries were right on top of them – they were about twenty yards away.” Accused went on to say he went up the boreen when he saw the lorries approach. Before he got to the top of the boreen he saw the police follow himself and Clancy. Seeing that there was no means of escape, he stood but could not say whether the revolver was taken from him or whether he threw it away.

Answering the Judge Advocate, the accused said he did not know the third person at all; he was a perfect stranger to him; he halted when the police ordered him to halt, and he did not know how he disposed of the revolver.

To conclude the trial, Mr Kinahan addressed the court for the defence. The Prosecutor having replied, the Judge Advocate summed up. The court then closed.24 When the court reached its decision, it found Tom Keane guilty on both charges and sentenced him to death by firing squad.

At the same time, three other IRA prisoners were under sentence of death. They were Captain Ned Punch of F Company and Lieutenant Timothy Murphy of E Company, who were also from Limerick. The third IRA man was a native of County Clare. Appeals for clemency were made for all four men. It was generally believed in Limerick that of the four men, Tom Keane had the best chance of being reprieved. He was a married man with a young family, and while he had been an active Volunteer, the scale of his activities did not come anywhere near those of either Punch or Murphy. Both men took part in the Dromkeen Ambush. Referring to the appeal for clemency, the Limerick Chronicle reported as follows:

With reference to the case of Thomas Keane tried by court-martial at Limerick on a charge of levying war and being improperly in possession of firearms, and whose sentence is pending for ratification by the authorities in Dublin, a memorial signed by his Lordship, Most Rev Dr Hallinan, and leading citizens of every class and creed in the community, has been forwarded. The memorialists pray for the exercise of the prerogative and the merciful commutation of the sentence on the grounds set forth. A petition influentially signed in the case of Edward Punch and Timothy Murphy sentenced on a similar charge, has also been forwarded.25

Patrick Maloney recalled a rescue attempt when he wrote:

The Brigade and Battalion staffs had under consideration plans to effect their rescue (Keane, Punch and Murphy), although the garr was heavily guarded by military, and armoured cars were constantly within its precincts or immediate vicinity. Two military officer's uniforms were captured during a raid on Cleere's Factory, and plans to kidnap two officers of the gaol guard and substitute two IRA men in the captured uniforms were taking shape when it was announced that Punch and Murphy had been reprieved. It was also believed in IRA circles that Keane would also be reprieved.26

Believing this to be the case the Battalion Staff called off the rescue attempt. This decision was to prove fatal for Tom Keane. At 8 o'clock on the morning of 4 June 1921, the British carried out the execution of Tom Keane in the New Barracks. He was executed by a British Army firing squad. The Limerick Leader reported: The condemned man was taken from the Limerick Prison to the Military Barracks about 10 am on Friday, and soon afterwards, Fr James Hayes, CC St Michael's, Chaplain
at the New Barracks, was sent for and remained most of the day, administering religious consolation, which was gratefully received.

On the Friday evening before his execution, Tom Keane had a final visit from his wife Helena and his mother Johanna. It was reported that he was quietly reconciled to his fate. On the evening before his execution, he wrote this touching farewell letter to his wife and children.

Dear Love - I know this is hard on you. I feel the same myself from parting from you and the children. But keep up your heart; it would be worse if I were shot walking the street. I have my soul prepared to meet my God - I do not fear meeting him in the Morning at 8 o'clock. Tell all the friends I was asking for them, Lily and Mary and Christy and Siss, also Pá and the missus and Johnny and your mother and all. Also tell my mother. All I ask from ye is to pray for ye in heaven. I will be looking on ye all. Good-bye and God bless you and the children.

From your loving husband, Tom.

Tom Keane's solicitor, Mr O. B. Moran on receiving notification that his client was to be executed the following day, made an application for a final visit. The application for the final meeting of solicitor and client was refused. Mr Moran protested, saying that this was the first time that a condemned man's legal representative was refused such a visit under similar circumstances.

The report in the Saturday edition of the Limerick Chronicle stated: This morning at 7 o'clock Mass was celebrated in the prisoner's cell by Fr Hayes. The prisoner followed the service with great devotion and received Holy Communion with the utmost reverence and respect. At the conclusion of the Mass, Fr Hayes gave the Papal Blessing to the condemned man, who walked to the place of execution without faltering and died firmly. Reporting on the execution, the Irish Independent stated: "Thomas Keane goes to his death calmly and firmly." Before the execution, Fr Hayes was ordered to withdraw out of sight of the firing party. Immediately after the fatal volley, he rushed forward and anointed the executed man. Following the execution, Mr Moran, solicitor, made an application on behalf of Tom Keane's widow, for possession of the body. The application was refused and later that day the military buried Tom Keane's body inside the Military Cemetery.

In the usual inquest held after every execution, the examining doctor in his certificate as to cause of death wrote the following: "Shock and hemorrhage result of shooting, which was properly carried out after sentence passed on him by Military Court on May 17, 1921."

Later in the day, the military authorities issued the following report: "Thomas Keane, civilian, 1 Moore's Lane, Limerick, was tried by a military court on the 14/5/1921. On two charges: (1) with levying war, and (2) with being improperly in possession of a revolver. Keane was found guilty of both charges and sentenced to be shot. The sentence was duly carried out this morning at 8 o'clock."

Referring to the scene on the Saturday morning of the execution, the Limerick Chronicle gave the following account:

Two hours, from six o'clock to eight o'clock this morning, large numbers of people, men, women and children congregated outside the New Barracks and the approaches thereto. Prayers were recited for the dead by the entire concourse, and sacred emblems were carried by many of the women present. At eight o'clock, when all was over, and it was known that the execution had taken place, the crowd gradually dispersed, pathetic figures in the assemblage were the wife of Thomas Keane, and his aged mother.

This report is very much at variance with what Magda Daly wrote in her unpublished memoirs. The following is how she remembered that morning:

The members of Cumann na mBan and a crowd of friends, mostly women, collected at various places around the barracks and on the morning of the execution, to pray and show sympathy with the brave Volunteer to give his life for his cause. My sister Laura had borrowed a beautiful silk banner with a picture of the Mother of God from Fr Hennessy of the Augustinian Church. She led the procession of Cumann na mBan to the wall of the barracks in Lord Edward Street where we all knelt and started the Rosary. Nearby on a chair outside one of the houses sat the poor young woman, counting the few minutes of life left to her husband. She was a pale, delicate-looking woman who was about to become a mother: it was a heart-breaking sight. In a short time, a lorry loaded with police and Black and Tans under Sergeant Horan drove up, dashed out of the car and made a fierce onslaught on the group of kneeling women. Mrs Daly (Maidie Daly's mother) had her rosary taken from her. Horan tore up the banner and danced on it. Horan darted about like a fury, beating around him with a baton. My mother got a blow on the shoulder, which was black and swollen for long time with injury to the bone, so that she suffered from an open wound until her death, as she was too old to operate on. I heard that he made similar attacks wherever he found people in prayer. I was told that Horan attacked poor Mrs. Keane, pulling the chair from under her.

On Friday 7 April 1922, during the ceasefire between the Truce and the Civil War, the remains of Tom Keane were removed from the grave in the New Barracks and were taken to St John's Cathedral for reburial. In a report, the Limerick Chronicle stated:

Requiem Mass was celebrated for the dead officer on Saturday morning. At 3 o'clock yesterday (Sunday), the funeral left the Cathedral for the cemetery and travelled by St Lelia St., Clare St., Assembly Mall, Rutland St., Patrick St. and William St. The cortège, which was of large proportions, included thirty of the city clergy, the hearse being preceded by a firing party of the IRA and two bands. In the vehicles were a large body of IRA, members of the Corporation, trades and labour bodies, Cumann na mBan, Fianna Boy Scouts, the boys of St Joseph's Orphanage as well as members of the general public. The route to the cemetery was lined by large numbers of the citizens. At the close of burial service the coffin was lowered into the grave. The 'Last Post' was sounded, and was followed by the firing of three volleys by the firing party.

This was to be the final resting place of the officer executed by Crown Forces outside of Dublin or Cork. He is buried in the Republican plot with his comrade and friend Henry Cancy and many other fellow Republicans.

**Sources**

1. Irish Times 6 April 1920.
2. Irish Independent 5 April 1920.
3. Limerick Leader 7 April 1920.
7. Sean Murphy, ed. The Saints go Marching On (Limerick 1986) 3.
8. Despite an intensive search for his grave in the cemetery, it cannot be located, Limerick Republican Graves Committee asserted the author of their intention of erecting a suitable plaque in the cemetery to his memory. The memorial was recently renovated due to the efforts of Phil Fitzgerald of the Dromore Memorial Committee.
11. Interview with Henry Cancy's niece Bernice (nee O'Hehir) 28 June 2011.
12. Limerick Chronicle 3 May 1921.
13. Limerick Leader 4 May 1921.
15. Interview with Henry Cancy's niece Bernice (nee O'Hehir) 28 June 2011.
16. Limerick Fighting Story (first edition) 194.
17. Interview with Henry Cancy's niece Bernice (nee O'Hehir) 28 June 2011.
18. Limerick Chronicle 5 May 1921.
19. Limerick Leader 18 May 1921.
20. Limerick Chronicle 17 May 1921.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Limerick Leader 18 May 1921.
27. Limerick Fighting Story (first ed.) p.196.
28. Limerick Leader 6 June 1921.
29. Limerick Chronicle 4 June 1921.
30. Irish Independent 6 June 1921.
31. Tom Keane death certificate.
32. Limerick Chronicle 4 June 1921.