

The Murder of the O'Donovan Brothers

Following early Mass on the morning of Sunday 20 February 1921 Aiden, Cecil and Thomas O'Donovan decided to walk from their home at Emma Villas, in Thomondgate, to Blackwater Mill in Parteen. The purpose of their journey was to search for bird's nests in the ruins of the mill. On their way to Blackwater their first cousin, Brendan O'Donovan who was known to his friends as Ben, joined them. Cecil who was the oldest of the three brothers was 18 years of age, while Thomas was 17 and Aiden was 14.¹ They resided with their parents Thomas and Alice, with four other brothers and two sisters, at 3 Emma Villas, Thomondgate. Their cousin Brendan was nineteen years of age and he was one of six children of Daniel and Gertrude O'Donovan, who lived on the Ennis Road. None of the O'Donovan brothers or their cousin had any involvement in politics or political movements.

They walked the four miles from their home in a casual manner and while there is no definite record, of the time of their arrival at the mill, it was probably around noon. Oblivious to the world around them the four youths began to search the ruins for bird's nests. At some stage a person who mistook them for IRA men on a training exercise observed them moving around the mill ruins and grounds.² Being engrossed in their quest they did not notice the approach of an RIC convoy of two Crossly tenders accompanied by two motorcars. The convoy containing RIC and Black and Tans drove out the main Limerick to Broadford road and halted near where Mc Mahon's public house and mortuary now stands.

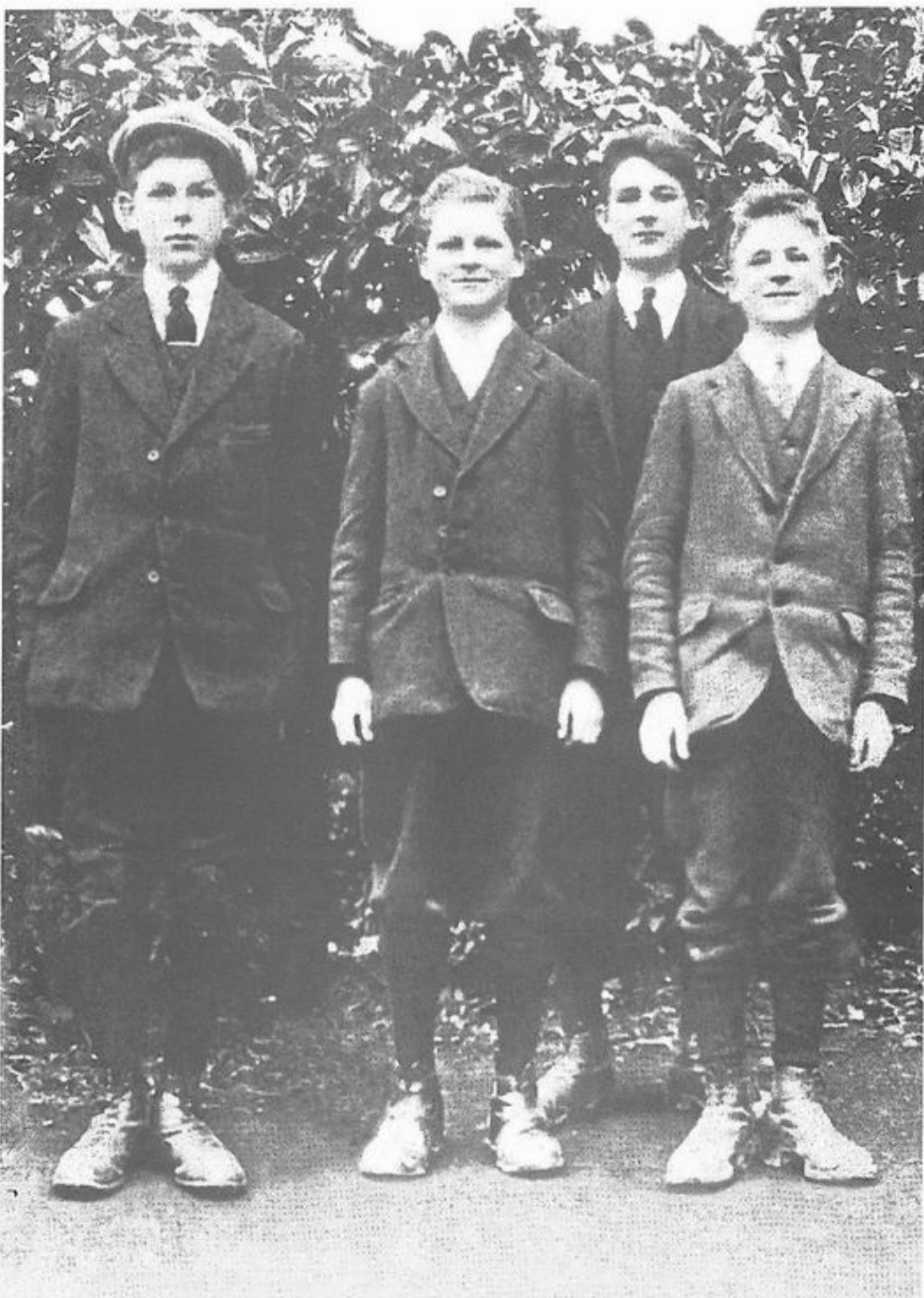
The convoy was under the command of District Inspector John Greally, who was originally from Westport, County Mayo and Captain David Sturrock an Intelligence officer attached to the Brigade Staff at the Military Barracks. Sturrock in his later account states that he had received information that the IRA was drilling in the grounds of the mill and it was on the foot of this information that the convoy was sent out. The two men in charge Inspector Greally and Captain Sturrock immediately moved up to investigate. Sturrock in his account stated that he saw '7 to 9' men streaming out from the mill. While the officers were still investigating the mill, a number of shouted orders came from the direction of where the tenders were parked. This was the first indication that the young O'Donovans had of the deadly danger they were in. Before they had time to respond to the shouting, fire was opened from this direction. This party of police and

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Black and Tans was under Sergeants James Horan³ and Lawrence Flynn. Fourteen year old Aiden O'Donovan was immediately hit in the chest and he fell mortally wounded. His older brother Cecil was hit between the eyes by a bullet and was killed instantly. Their cousin Brendan managed to escape through the grounds of the mill. A badly shocked and frightened Thomas O'Donovan, put up his hands and surren-

dered to Captain Sturrock. A ceasefire was called immediately and details of the tragedy soon unfolded.

A Military Inquiry, into the shooting of the O'Donovan brothers was held at the New Barracks on Tuesday 22 February.⁴ The Inquiry was under the Presidency of Colonel R J P Anderson assisted by Major Kemble of the Royal Garrison Artillery⁵ and Lieutenant H J Byrne of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. It was very clear that no order to open fire was given by either Captain Sturrock or Inspector Greally and in Sturrock's own evidence he stated that



O'Donovan brothers pictured shortly before the tragedy at Blackwater, L-R: Cecil, Aiden, Clement and John



3, Emma Villas (stone faced house, left foreground) home to the O'Donovan brothers

acks. However, his real function appears to have been that of Brigade Intelligence Officer. He also gave critical evidence at the Military Inquiry into the shootings of the IRA men killed at Caherguillamore. On that occasion his knowledge of IRA members left no doubt that his role as officer in charge of transport and barrack cleaning was a cover for his real activities.

The remaining O'Donovan siblings and their parents were to mourn the loss of Cecil and Aiden out of the glare of official sympathy. When Hamar Greenwood, Chief Secretary for Ireland, was questioned by a Labour MP, J G Hancock he persisted in saying that the O'Donovan brothers were tragically killed playing around the mill while a party of 8 or 9 IRA were using the building for training exercises. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of how the IRA operated knew that Greenwood was being totally disingenuous. On no account would the IRA have allowed non-members to search for bird's nests while they were carrying out training exercises on the same premises.

Cecil and Aiden O'Donovan's father, Thomas Snr died in July 1926 when he was

about 59 years of age. His wife Alice lived until 1959 when she was well into her eighties. Of the seven surviving siblings Nora, who was the eldest became a nurse and settled in England where she married and had one child, who is now deceased. The second eldest Alice married a Mr King and lived at Osmington Terrace in Thomondgate, just around the corner from her parents. Sadly Alice died at a relatively young age without having a family. The oldest surviving son, Thomas, went to England and lost contact with the family. Patrick, the next surviving son, was married and had two children, one of whom died some years ago. His daughter, Hazel is one of the few surviving children. Patrick died in England in 1970. The seventh member of the family, Francis, joined the British Army during World War II. He died in London in 1943 from illness picked up while serving in Aden. He was only thirty four and unmarried when he died. The second youngest son Clement was married to Bridget O'Shea, a well-known figure in Bridge circles in Limerick. Clement and Bridget lived at Lansdowne Park until they died some years ago. The youngest son,

Brendan John, (known as John) who was born in November 1911, married Julia Murphy from Tralee and they lived in O'Connell Street. They had two children Michael and Mary. Julia O'Donovan died in 1971 and her husband John died in 1982. Michael attended the CBS in Sexton Street and was a very useful hurler and soccer player until he emigrated to England. Mary, his younger sister, married Pat Beegan and settled in Limerick. Surprisingly, Mary who was the youngest child of the youngest child is the only one still living in Limerick.

Sadly the fate of the two young O'Donovans has long been forgotten and their memory has slipped inexorably from the pages of history. However, the 'Meelick and Cratloe War of Independence Commemoration Committee' plan to rectify this matter by raising a plaque to the memory of the young men in 2013.

The author would like to thank Mrs Mary Beegan (nee O'Donovan) and Mrs Deirdre O'Donovan (nee Lloyd) for their assistance in compiling this article.

REFERENCES

- 1 The O'Donovan family was closely connected to Lloyds, a noted family of Limerick Wine merchants. Cecil O'Donovan was employed as a clerk at White's Wine Store in O'Connell Street while Thomas O'Donovan was employed in a similar capacity in O'Brien's Wine Store in Thomas Street. -Ref *Limerick Leader* 21 February 1921.
- 2 WO 35/157A (British National Archives Kew). p.2.
- 3 Sergeant James Horan, a native of County Mayo, was the most notorious RIC man or Black and Tan in Limerick during the period. Long before the outbreak of hostilities he was regarded as a town bully. After the War of Independence he emigrated to London where he worked under an assumed name. He was seen working in Gamudges Department Store by a Limerick family in the 1930s.
- 4 WO 35/157 A (British National Archives Kew). p.2.
- 5 The Royal Garrison Artillery was based at King John's Castle
- 6 Corbally and Ardnacrusha RIC Barracks had both been closed since 1920.



The mill grounds in the right foreground and the electric pylon is sited near where the O'Donovan brothers were shot



Roadway facing south, near Blackwater Inn, where Crossly Tenders were parked and from which the fatal shots were fired