

# The Day General Michael Collins came to Limerick

## Introduction

Some of the information contained in this story was written at least sixty years after the events described. Memories of witnesses were not as sharp then as they would have been in August 1922. As dates and times conflict, an effort is made to put the events into perspective and relate them in a chronological order.

**T**he advent of Civil War in Ireland meant that one of the most dreadful episodes in Irish history was about to unfold. The war divided communities, families and long established friendships. The culmination of the War of Independence resulted in a Treaty that offered self-government to twenty six counties of Ireland with Dominion status within the Commonwealth, leaving six counties in the North-East of the island still under full British rule. Michael Collins, who had led the Irish negotiating team, argued that the treaty gave "the freedom to achieve freedom." Republicans were not prepared to accept anything other than full independence. The outbreak of the Civil War forced pro-treaty and anti-treaty supporters to choose sides. Supporters of the treaty became known as the 'Free State Army' or 'Staters' by opposing Republicans who were known as 'Irregulars'.

When anti-Treaty forces occupied the Four Courts in Dublin on 13 April 1922 an uneasy peace reigned in the Capital until 27 June, when soldiers of the new National Army began shelling the Four Courts. By July the fighting had moved out of Dublin and into the provinces. Munster became the anti-Treaty stronghold and Collins who had resigned from the government to take charge of the National Army, was aware that if the Provisional Government was to survive and maintain control of the country, then victory was imperative in this region.<sup>1</sup> Limerick became a focal point when units of the National Army were ordered to occupy the anti-Treaty positions in the city. These were principally the Ordnance Barracks on Mulgrave Street, the Strand Barracks, the New Barracks on Edward Street and King John's Castle. Collins had been making an inspection tour of the liberated areas and by 12 August he was in Tralee.<sup>2</sup> When news of President Arthur Griffith's death reached Collins he cut short his inspection tour and headed for

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Dublin stopping on his way at Limerick. It is not known when he left Tralee or what route he took, but a young boy, Michael Dore, recalled that he saw him in Newcastle West on 14 August, reviewing some soldiers marching in the town square.

I ambled up to the square to find a section of troops in uniform being drilled. They were surrounded by a ring of spectators. The man putting them through their paces was wearing civilian clothing with a Sam Brown belt, rifle and velour hat. Observing the routine close by was a tall erect broad-shouldered man in officer's uniform and great coat, to which was attached distinctive red epaulettes. Two other officers stood close behind him. The tall man had a scowl on his face as he watched the drill and I got the impression he did not like what he saw. Soon the man in the 'civvies' brought the drill to an end and, marching across, rifle on shoulder, stood to attention before the tall man. The latter, still scowling, uttered a few words and 'civvies' marched back again to his troops and got them to repeat the exercise. This time he apparently made the grade as, on an approving nod from the tall man, the troops were dismissed. An adult behind me enquired, "Do you know who that man is, sonny?" No I replied. "That's Michael Collins," said he. "And who is Michael Collins?" I asked. "He is a great general".<sup>3</sup>

On Tuesday morning, 15 August, Collins attended a Requiem High Mass for the late President Griffith in St John's Cathedral, Limerick. The church was filled to capacity with some of those attending kneeling on the street outside. The Bishop, most Reverend Dr Hallinan, presided at the ceremonies, those present besides Collins included General Eoin O'Duffy and other officers of the Command Staff. Accompanied by a guard of honour, General Collins and his staff were recognised on the way to the church and were given a cordial ovation by the people. At the conclusion of the Mass they remained a while chatting with Dr Hallinan. When they emerged from the church they were warmly greeted by the people.

Later on, General Collins gave an interview on the military situation to members of the press. The main resistance of the



General Michael Collins six days before he was killed in an ambush at Beal na Blath

Irregulars [anti-treaty forces] he said "was practically at an end." He did not think, "their tactics in ambushing the National troops could last very long or meet with any degree of success. The military operations in the south will be completed within the next fortnight." The "other people appear to be unable to make a strong stand in any place, and their resistance will rapidly vanish." When asked how soon the new parliament could be expected to meet, he said- "I can advise the government that as far as the military situation is concerned the new Parliament can meet at any time. Whether it will be further postponed out of respect to the late President Griffith I do not know."

To questions concerning the possibility of the Irregulars interfering with the meeting of the new Parliament in Dublin, the General smilingly replied, "they have been unable to do practically any damage so far." Their greatest efforts, he pointed out, "resulted principally in causing casualties among the civilian population, but as far as

interfering with the new Parliament is concerned, the government will be able to deal with them fully".<sup>4</sup>

One of the people who saw Collins that day was Charlie St George, a young man whose family owned a public house, on Parnell Street, in 1922. Charlie related many years later how he got to see Collins. Apparently a local National Army officer, Timmy Murphy, from Carey's Road, was a customer in the pub.

On Monday morning I arrived as usual [at the pub] and I served him his pint. We got chatting, and I mentioned that 'The Chief', as they used to call Collins, would be in town the following morning, Tuesday, and that he was on a tour of inspection. As I had never seen Collins in person, I asked Timmy if it were possible to see him, not necessarily meet him, just get a look at him.

Timmy replied that if I were in front of the National Army headquarters [formerly the offices of Bord na gCon near the Garda Station] in Henry Street, between 11 and 11.30 am Collins would be leaving to continue his journey.

So the following morning, I was standing on the road in front of the headquarters, close to a small armoured car in front of which were two motorbikes, standing on their props and facing up the road. Behind them were three big touring cars standing around, which were six drivers in all. There were no visible signs of arms of any description, with the exception of the muzzle of a machine-gun, pointing out from the slot at the front of the turret of the Whippet. Occasionally, the muzzle moved, indicating there was another soldier in there, like as if he was settling the inside or that he was uncomfortable inside. There were no pressmen or photographers to be seen.

After about twenty minutes, Collins appeared at the door of the headquarters. He moved forward slowly, followed by six or seven officers, including Timmy Murphy. Collins wore a very long green overcoat, buttoned up to the neck, and he wore a peaked round military-style cap. He had his two arms across his chest, as he stood at the top of the steps at the entrance. He looked straight ahead. There were groups of people standing around in curiosity, and Collins looked at them and then looked left and right. Collins group moved to the cars with the drivers now in position. Suddenly Collins turned round to his right, stretched out his arm and shook hands with Murphy. Then the group broke up, Collins taking his seat alongside the driver of the first car, the other officers divided up between the other two cars. As I stood looking the convoy moved off, in the general direction of the Redemptorist church.<sup>5</sup>

After Griffith's funeral Collins resumed his inspection tour of the South. Limerick man, Willie W Gleeson, then a young man



Willie W Gleeson who, as a young man, met General Collins

in National Army, stationed outside Limerick at Bruree, relates how Collins passed through the area on his way to Cork.

On his way to his native Cork, he had a meal at the *Big Tree* restaurant in Caherconlish. Resuming his journey, he made a brief stop at Bruree, where a Unit of 'D' Company, 39th Infantry Battalion, Limerick, was based at Cleev-es Factory. As one of the unit, my guard duty was from 2 pm to 4 pm., that day was for me, something to remember. My post was inside the entrance door, the main gate adjoining. Suddenly on the stroke of 3 o'clock, a fierce kick sent the double gate wide open. I shouted to the two relief sentries, Vols. Paddy Morrissey and Mickey Bowman, "Guard turn out."

Almost immediately, an officer whom I recognised as Comdt. General Donal O'Hannigan, since he never wore a cap in the army, at the same time, carried a 45 Smith and Wesson automatic pistol, held tightly in his hand, came into the yard. He was followed by a high-ranking officer, whom I did not recognise, with gold braid on peak of cap and shoulders notwithstanding. Immediately he approached me and asked: "Who's in charge here?"

Captain Costello, sir, but he's not here today, he being on official army business in Dublin. "Who then, is acting during his absence" he quipped. Lieutenant Carmody, sir, I replied. Scarcely had I finished, when the Lieutenant, who was in the office nearby, met his superior officer. They both moved towards a fence over-looking the Maigue River, and after a brief conversation, the matter ended.

Next, Lt. Carmody, who appeared to be smiling as he approached me, said:

"Did you know who the high ranking officer was?" "No" I said, "I never saw him before." Well, he said, he was General Michael Collins.<sup>6</sup>

On the evening of 22 August, Collins and his convoy were driving through Beal na Blath, in County Cork, when rifle shots rang out from the hills above them. As the ambush party retreated, Collins was shot dead. The motor cyclist, or outrider, Scout officer, Lt. John Joe Smith, who had been sent to Limerick to meet the convoy<sup>7</sup> was hit by a bullet in the neck as he helped to retrieve the General's body.<sup>8</sup>

After the Civil War Lt. John Joe Smith, originally from Enniscorthy, County Wexford, settled in Limerick, where he worked for the ESB for many years. Apart from a short period spent in Bengal Terrace, he lived at Charlotte Quay, Limerick from 1927, until his death, from a heart attack at the age of 67, in 1963.<sup>9</sup>

In Limerick the news of Collins' death was received with shock and horror. The first intimation of the General's death was when he was prayed for at early morning Masses in the city. As the day progressed the news became common knowledge and the feelings that it created was visible on the faces of the people. In Limerick, as elsewhere through the country, the people revered the dead soldier patriot, and this was only too evident during his recent visit to the city, when he received a hearty ovation every time he appeared on the streets.

On learning of the tragic news, the Deputy Mayor of Limerick, Paul O'Brien sent the following message to Mr. Liam T Cosgrave, Acting Chairman of the Irish Government: - The bravest and best is gone for ever. The word 'sorrow' fails to describe my feelings.

Limerick County Council also sent messages of sympathy to the Provisional Government and relatives of the dead General: - Profoundly shocked at calamitous disaster to Ireland in the death of General Michael Collins, and we offer to the government and relatives, on behalf of Limerick County Council, our sincere sympathy.<sup>10</sup>

The Civil War ended in May 1923 when the Anti-Treaty leadership ordered their forces to dump their arms.

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- 10 *Cork Examiner*, 24 August 1922.