‘Car gone. Passengers drowned. Tommy safe.’
Limerick’s links to the first casualties of the Easter Rising

by Eoin Shanahan

There is a fascinating photograph of an old car in the Jesuit archive in Melbourne, Australia. The owner of the photograph was Fr. Willie Hackett, an ardent republican who ministered in Limerick through 1914-1922. Hackett’s papers bear witness to a catalogue of acquaintances that reads like a who’s who of the revolutionary period: Eamon De Valera, Michael Collins, Molly and Erskine Childers. He even had the distinction of being the recipient of Collins’s last letter and his life story has recently been published in The Riddle of Father Hackett: a life in Ireland and Australia, by Brenda Niall.

The owner of the car was another ardent republican, John Joe Quilty of Weston Cottage, Rosbrien, Limerick. Like Hackett, Quilty was a subtle player in the events of the period but it was his car that would make headlines for its part in one of the most dramatic events of the time.

It is the dedication underneath the photograph that yields clues to the car’s tragic history. ‘To Fr Hackett. A souvenir of 1916 from the owner. J. J. Quilty’. The car itself was a c. 1915 Briscoe Model B Deluxe Touring. It was known as Cyclops since it had only one headlamp; something that was illegal in some states and which may have contributed to its subsequent fate.

John Joe Quilty was greatly trusted in the Volunteer movement and it was no surprise that he was chosen to play a small but central role in Sir Roger Casement’s plan to land from the Aud 20,000 German guns and a million rounds of ammunition at Fenit on the Kerry coast in late April 1916.

Seán McDermott and Joseph Plunkett, with some input from Michael Collins, had decided to seize some transmitting equipment to facilitate communication with the Aud, which was impossible because the Aud was not wireless enabled, and to distract British naval vessels that were in the area. They had identified a number of men who had the expertise to make it all happen. They were Dinny Daly, Con Keating (22), Charlie Monaghan (37), Dan Sheehan (30) and Colm O’Lochlainn. Keating’s experience as a wireless operator, together with his local knowledge, made him an obvious choice for the mission. He had trained in his native Cahirciveen at Maurice Fitzgerald’s Atlantic College and it was he, together with Daly who proposed breaking into Fitzgerald’s school to get the necessary apparatus.

The college was closed for Easter, Fitzgerald was out of town and they would have a choice of two Marconi transmitters, each of which was capable of operating on battery power. The lighter of the two weighed one hundred-weight without its batteries and had a range of one hundred miles, so it is likely that they would choose this one ahead of the other, which weighed up to six hundred-weight without its batteries.

On Holy Thursday evening Seán McDermott briefed the men on their mission at 44 Mountjoy Street, Dublin. All five would travel by train to Killarney, where they would be met by two cars that would drive them to Cahirciveen via Killorglin. At Killarney, all but one of the men would walk to an agreed meeting point outside the town. The man who remained at the station would approach the drivers and ask “Are you from Michael?” to which the drivers would respond “Yes. Who are you?” The reply was “I am from William”. By way of final confirmation of their bona fides, the drivers would each open a clenched fist to reveal a clump of grass. All would proceed to pick up the other four for the drive to Cahirciveen.

Having procured the transmitter from Atlantic College, they would deliver it to a group of Tralee Volunteers before first light on Easter Saturday. Sheehan, Keating and Monaghan would remain with the equipment, which would be put into operation at the home of J. P. O’Donnell in Ballyard, Tralee.

Meanwhile, in Limerick, John Joe Quilty was chosen to drive one of the two cars but a family issue got in the way and he arranged for Sam Windrim (who worked in J. P. Evans Munitions Works on Catherine Street) to take his place. The second driver was Tommy McInerney, who ran a garage nearby. After Windrim had taken the IRA oath the two drivers were briefed by ‘father of the battalion’ Jim Leddin and Con Collins. McInerney filled a number of drums of petrol and he drove to Rosbrien with Windrim. From there, McInerney drove Quilty’s Briscoe and Windrim drove McInerney’s Maxwell. The drivers agreed that if they were stopped they would say that they were en
The night was pitch black and peripheral vision was surely limited by the fact that the Briscoe had only one centrally located headlamp. On the approach road to the pier, McNerney suggested that they stop and ask for directions, but Keating assured him that they were on the right road and that the walls they could see were the walls of the bridge. As the car continued along the pier, it was reassuring to see the lights of houses to their left. They were not to know that the buildings were some miles away and that the river Laune flowed between. McNerney noted that the road was "shingly". By the time he got to apply the brake it was too late. The front wheels left the road, leaving the car balanced on the edge and the collective effort to get out destabilised it plunging the car and its occupants into sixteen feet of water.16

Tim O’Sullivan was sitting by the fire at about 9:45 p.m. when he heard the Briscoe pass by. He went outside and he knew that something was amiss when he heard some splashing and a man’s cry for help. Fetching a candle, he hurried to the shore and called out repeatedly to indicate the way to safety. McNerney eventually scrambled ashore, breathless and bleeding from a deep calf wound that was probably sustained when he caught his leg in the door of the car as he exited. When he came to, he told O’Sullivan that there had been three passengers. Con Keating had swum with him for some distance before succumbing with the words “Jesus, Mary and Joseph”.18 They watched and listened for some time but there was no sound and the only sight was of something shining in the water where the car had sunk. They entered O’Sullivan’s home after McNerney had draped his overcoat across a fence. On reporting the accident at the RIC station McNerney was given a policeman’s uniform in place of his wet clothes.19

Word spread quickly and crowds flocked to the scene. O’Sullivan’s near neighbour, Patsy Begley, arrived with some lamps. McNerney’s overcoat was brought into the house and when a loaded revolver was found in the coat pocket Begley realised that this was not a hackney man driving bank clerks around Kerry as McNerney had claimed. The quick-thinking Begley sat on the revolver when four policemen arrived to investigate. McNerney stuck to his story that he had been engaged to drive the men around the Ring of Kerry and that there was no predetermined route to Killarney to pick up a Colonel Warwick and his party.10 Earlier, Quilty had changed the Briscoe’s registration number.11 It was after the registration numbers had been recorded at an RIC checkpoint in Newcastle West that Windrim spotted that the numerical closeness of the registrations of the two cars might arouse suspicion, since the Briscoe was new and the Maxwell was more than a year old.13

It was raining heavily in Killarney when the two drivers picked up their passengers. Windrim led the way with Daly (a native of Castletownbere) and O’Lochlainn. McNerney followed in the Briscoe with Keating, Sheehan and Monaghan. As they drew close to Killorglin the two cars became separated when the drivers took different approach roads to the town. Windrim and his crew proceeded slowly to Cahirciveen where they were again stopped and questioned by an RIC patrol.19

McNerney arrived in Killorglin via the Beaufort road at about 9:30 p.m. Seventeen-year-old Lily Taylor answered the door to his front seat passenger at her mother’s hotel trading as the ‘Private Hotel’ on Lower Bridge Street. The inquirer asked where the road ahead would lead him and Lily responded that if he continued a short distance and turned left at the chapel gate the road would bring them to Caragh Lake Hotel.14 The car proceeded, but instead of taking a left turn at the church it continued straight towards Ballykissane Quay.
Three men who drowned at Ballykissane

Charlie Monaghan
Con Keating
Donal Sheehan

itinerary. Searches continued through the night and some items were found on the shore: a cap, an Oxford lunch cake wrapped in silver foil, a notebook, a petrol tin and some oranges.

Máirín Cregan (later to marry Dr. Jim Ryan, TD) had just arrived in town, concealed in the guard's van of a cattle train from Tralee. She had earlier travelled from Dublin with a violin case of revolvers and some written instructions for Austin Stack from Seán McDermott. Cregan instinctively knew that there was more to the unfolding events at Ballykissane than McNerney imagined. She arranged for his leg to be sawed off and found him a place to stay for the night where he could be dressed and found him sitting comfortably on a chair. In the morning, he was in a cab to Begley's house and, against Begley's better judgment, reclaimed his cart to the courthouse, where it was laid on some straw. Presently, Keating's body was taken from the water and laid on the gravel as the rain poured down. Máirín Cregan offered to cover it out of respect, but an observer noted that it would not make much difference to the poor lad.24

A revolver, multiple cartridges, a two-foot rule, a pliers and some rubber tube were found on Keating's body. On hearing this news, Patsy Begley again pleaded with McNerney to part with his gun, which he did reluctantly and with minutes to spare before he was arrested and lodged in Tralee Gaol.25

At the courthouse, Dr. W.H. Dodd, medical officer for the area confirmed the cause of death as drowning and the subsequent inquests found accordingly. Friends of Keating gathered by the corpse to lament his passing with the heartrending cry of a traditional Irish air.26 He was buried in the family plot at Killean, Cahirciveen. Dan Sheehan was a native of Ballintubrid, Newcastle West. He had worked at Gery's biscuit factory in Limerick. His family, not wishing to give any further leads to the investigating authorities, waited some months before acknowledging his identity. Killorglin police refused to have his remains buried with Keating and he was interred in nearby Dromavalla. At his inquest a juror named Lyne proposed that some of the three pounds and nine shillings found in his pockets should be used to pay for "a decent shroud and coffin, as he was an Irishman, and the money found by the police on his body was his own earnings?27

Police investigations quickly linked the events at Ballykissane to Casement's attempt to import arms. Both Quilty and Windrim thought it best to stick to the explanations that they had already rehearsed with McNerney. Windrim and McNerney had agreed on the story that McNerney had received a wire seeking the hire of two cars, with drivers, to collect a Colonel Warwick and his party at Killarney.28 In the event that McNerney would sell his Maxwell to Killarney to a Captain Jameson, he would return to Limerick in the Briscoe.

When, on his return to Limerick, Windrim visited McNerney's brother Jimmy on Easter Sunday, Jimmy had just received a wire that read: "Car gone. Passengers drowned. Tommy safe". Windrim was later questioned by two G men29 and he made a statement in accordance with what he had agreed with Tommy McNerney. Windrim spent much of Easter Sunday at Quilty's house in Rosbrien, where they rehearsed their accounts of recent events.30 On returning to his home late that night, Windrim was arrested by two G men, Walsh and O'Sullivan "for aiding and abetting gun-runners in the counties of Kerry and Limerick..." During questioning, Walsh put it to Windrim that McNerney "...knew all about Good Friday's business". Windrim responded "If he knew all about it I was not aware of it". When his statement was read out in court the following day, the eagle-eyed Windrim noticed that the "If" had

Meanwhile, the search for the bodies of the missing three men began in earnest. The tide had gone out and the hood of the empty car was visible. The car was hoisted from the water using a chain supplied by Begley21 and it was brought to the yard of hardware merchants T & R. Stephens.22 The trawl for the bodies was led by Pat and Terence Flynn of the Dodd and Power Fishery. After some unproductive searches close to the pier, the body of Dan Sheehan was found over eighty yards away. The police investigation took a different slant when two revolvers and some cartridges were found in his pockets.23 The mystery deepened when locals failed to recognise Sheehan, whose body was taken in a
been omitted, thereby incriminating both himself and McNerney. On his insistence, the word was inserted.31 Windrim spent some days in Limerick Jail before being brought to Richmond Barracks in Dublin, where he was lodged in the gymnasium. After the executions of the 1916 leaders, he was transported on a cattle boat to Wakefield Prison, from where he was released shortly afterwards.32

Tommy McNerney served his sentence in Loft 3 of Frongoch internment camp.33 He was parted from his gun until Good Friday 1918 when Begley's son returned it to him at McNerney's Limerick home.34 McNerney died from injuries sustained in a firearms accident in Annacarry, County Tipperary, ten months after the truce.35

John Joe Quilty was arrested three times in the aftermath of the events of Good Friday and he stuck to the story that he had agreed with McNerney. As in the case of Windrim, efforts were made to doctor his statement but Quilty resisted all efforts to put words in his mouth. When a Detective O'Mahoney put it to Quilty that he had not reported the loss of his car and that he had not made enquiries of Tommy McNerney's family, Quilty responded that he had actually gone "...to the nearest authoritative source, namely, Sir Anthony Weldon, commander of the forces..." He avoided jail, but his movements were closely monitored for some considerable time.36

It was some months before Quilty was allowed to reclaim the Briscoe. On arrival at the RIC barracks in Killorglin, he refused to make a statement and was escorted by a policeman to Stephen's yard where the car had been stored. Quilty initially refused a demand of £20 for the salvage of the car but he eventually succumbed to the subliminal persuasion of a large group of men carrying pitchforks and sticks. This group had been rounded up by police.37 In March 1966 Quilty's son, Joe, presented the windscreen frame of the Briscoe to President Eamon De Valera at Áras an Uachtarán. It was subsequently donated to the Kilmainham Jail Museum.38

In October 1916 a headless skeleton, believed to be that of Charlie Monaghan, was found on an island on the River Laune. He was buried without positive identification in Dromavalla cemetery. In keeping with protocols for those who died in active service during the 1916 Rising, Keating, Sheehan and Monaghan were upgraded to the rank of officer.39

The futility of the expedition that ended in tragedy at Ballykissane became clear when it was discovered that land and sea operations were not synchronised and that the Aer had no capacity for wireless communication. Thus, by the time Quilty's Briscoe tumbled into the water at Ballykissane on the night of Good Friday 21 April, Casement had been
arrested and the Aud, having waited in vain near Fenit for twenty four hours, was being escorted to Cork Harbour by a British naval vessel. On the following day, as the bodies of the first casualties of the Easter Rebellion were taken from the water at Ballykissane, twenty thousand German guns were sinking to the ocean floor as Spindler scuttled his Aud off the coast of Cobh in Cork Harbour.

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(Endnotes)

2. BMW WS 110 (Denis Daly) p.1. Con Collins disputed Michael Collins’s involvement in a letter to the Kerry Champion, dated 10 September 1929. See appendix to Mrs Austin Stack, BMW WS 214, Cóbh O’Lochlainn, BMW WS 751, p.2 is quite specific about Collins’s involvement.
4. BMW WS 110 (Denis Daly), p.1. Dan Breen, in My Fight for Irish Freedom, wrote that the transmitters were to be used for the broadcast of news of the rebellion.
5. Ibid, Cóbh O’Lochlainn, BMW WS 751, p.3 states that petrol was to be sprinkled and the building set alight.
7. Sam Windrim, Appendix to BMW WS 765 (James A Gubbins).
8. BMW WS 110 (Denis Daly) p.2. William Mullins, ‘Kerry was prepared and ready in Kerry’s Fighting Story 1916-21: as told by the men who made it’ (Cork, 2009), p.72, Paddy Cahill, Appendix B, BMW WS 416 (Máirín Cregan) stated in a letter to the Military Pensions Board that the wireless station was to be erected in the home of a relative of a

Dr. Quinlan at Ballyard.
9. BMW WS 516 (John Joe Quilty). An article by Willellemse in The Limerick Leader, 15 April 1967, claims, according to the Dr. Quinlan, that Tommy Quinlan had been chosen to drive one of the cars and that Quinlan, who was an instructed to report to the ‘D’C East Limerick Battalion, had arranged for Sam Windrim to take his place.
10. Sam Windrim, Appendix to BMW WS 765 (James A Gubbins).
11. Xander Clayton, Aud. states that the number of the Maxwell was changed from TI 404 to IK 724. Clayton’s version is probably the most credible since a Maxwell hit-seater, classed as for ‘High On Fire’ with the registration number TI 404 was registered in the name of Thomas McAneny & Co. Catherine Street, on 26 June 1915 (See: http://www.limerick.ie/node/23027 in L/MT/V. 7 April 1915-9 September 1015).
12. John Joe Quilty, BMW WS 516, p.8 states that he had changed the number plate of the Briscoe from TI 174 to IK 744. Windrim’s BMW’s statement records the number of the Maxwell as IK 1724 and the altered number of the Briscoe as IK 1742. Joyce, in The Story of Limerick and Kerry in 1916, Capuchin Annual (1966), p.348 states that the altered number of the Briscoe was TI 172 and that the number of the Maxwell was TI 174. Apart from TI 404, none of the above numbers appear to have been registered to McAneny or to Quilty. However, Quilty’s car was now and may have some plan or arrangement with the garage pending registration.
13. Sam Windrim, Appendix to BMW WS 765 (James A Gubbins).
14. Ibid.
15. Kerryman, 29 April 1916, p.3; Kerryman, 29 April 1916, p.3.
16. The Kerryman, 29 April 1916, p.3.
17. Máirín Cregan in The Irish Press, 24 April 1933. Máirín Cregan refers readers of her BMW witness statement to this article as an accurate account of events.
18. Kerryman, 29 April 1916, p.3.
19. BMW WS 516 (John Joe Quilty).
20. BMW WS 416 (Máirín Cregan).