

Mortal Incompatibility

The fate of two policemen who served in Rathkeale

by Tom Toomey

In 1910 the RIC sub-district of Rathkeale was in the charge of 29 year old District Inspector Oswald Swanzy and 44 year old Head Constable Patrick Brosnan. Swanzy was a solicitor's son from Castleblaney, County Monaghan and Brosnan was from a more ordinary background in Dunmanway, County Cork. Swanzy was appointed District Inspector 3rd Class in June 1905 at the relatively young age of 26. Soon after his promotion he was appointed to Rathkeale sub-district, where Brosnan was the Head Constable. From a fairly early stage it seems the two men appear to have had a personality clash and matters came to a head in May 1910 when Swanzy had Brosnan court-martialled on a number of charges, but the primary charge seems to be 'drinking on the job' and dereliction of duty. It may well have been that Brosnan had the occasional 'tipple' on the job but that would have been a fairly regular occurrence for the older members of the force and many of the officers as well. However on the specific day in question Brosnan had been out on patrol on a bicycle when it appears that a dog crossed his path and he was thrown to the ground and received a number of cuts and bruises. As the accident happened near a public house in the Ardagh area he was taken in to the pub and given a tumbler of whiskey to help him recuperate.

When Brosnan returned to the barracks his physical condition was noted by his superior who also detected the smell of whiskey. Swanzy immediately put Brosnan on remand and the Cork man was court-martialled at Rathkeale some time afterwards. Swanzy carried out the prosecution in front of a court of three District Inspectors, while Brosnan was represented by a local solicitor. It was obvious from the cut and thrust of the case, that although the court was made up of three of Swanzy's peers, the court was if anything more sympathetic to the defendant.

The findings of the court were not issued and they cannot be found in the local newspapers for that time. It does appear, however that some compromise was reached in that Brosnan was transferred to the Royal Irish Fusiliers as a musketry instructor with the rank of Sergeant-major. This necessitated Brosnan moving to Dublin where his wife and family were accommodated in living quarters at Dublin Castle. It is significant that shortly after the court-martial in 1910, Swanzy was transferred to Carlow. He was unmarried and he lived with his widowed mother Elizabeth and sister Irene. The authorities must not have been impressed with Swanzy, as it was unusual for a superior officer to be transferred following a trial of one of his men.

Swanzy was transferred again on 1 January 1916, this time to Cork city. It was also a time when the Inspector General of the RIC Joseph Byrne sent a circular to all District Inspectors, especially those who were unmarried, requesting that they make themselves available for service in the army. There was a close relationship between the RIC and the Irish Guards, but as this was regarded as an elite regiment it was likely to be sent to the front and the life expectancy for young officers would not be great. Swanzy shied away from answering the call on a number of occasions, giving any manner of excuse for doing so. Eventually he made an offer that he was prepared to serve if he was given a commission at the rank of Captain in the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) which was a unit that normally served at a safe distance from the front line. It appears that the army authorities had sufficient officers in the RASC and they did not take up Swanzy's patriotic offer.

On Easter Week 1916 Brosnan was due to return to his unit, which was based in Bunrana, County Donegal, following a leave period with his wife Lucy and their family in Dublin. When

the Volunteers attacked Dublin Castle on Easter Monday, Brosnan unarmed and in civilian attire, went to the aid of the military and police guarding the gate of the castle. In the course of the ensuing battle over the next two days he disarmed one of the attackers and as he was in civilian clothes one of the British soldiers mistook him for a Volunteer and shot him dead. He died on Easter Tuesday. Ironically the first fatality on the previous day was also a policeman with Limerick connections, James O'Brien from Glin. Patrick Brosnan was fifty years old and left his wife Lucy, who hailed from Leitrim, and seven young children to mourn his loss.

In March 1920 Thomas McCurtain the Republican Mayor and the IRA Commandant of Cork was shot dead by a police party who broke into his home and shot him in his night clothes. Oswald Swanzy was held responsible by the IRA for leading the raid on McCurtain's. When it became known to the RIC authorities that Swanzy was being targeted he was moved to a safer part of the country, Lisburn in County Antrim. However he was tracked down by the IRA and on Sunday 22 August 1920 he was shot dead by a party that included another Glin man, Sean Culhane.

It is ironic how the wheels of fate collide and it may well have been that if the two men had a better relationship and continued to serve a while longer in Rathkeale, they both might have survived the conflict.