

Harbouring some fugitives of 1916

by Tom Toomey

The custom of harbouring fugitives from British authorities has been a tradition in Ireland dating back into the mists of time. Some occurrences have been well documented, but three significant cases that occurred in County Limerick in the aftermath of the 1916 Rebellion have almost gone unnoticed. The first and probably the most famous case relates to Robert Monteith, a Wicklow born former member of the British Army.

Monteith had landed at Banna Strand on Good Friday, 21 April 1916, with Roger Casement and Sergeant Beverley or Bailey. Monteith, who was the only one of the party approaching a state of physical fitness, went to get aid for his two companions whilst they hid in McKenna's fort among the sand dunes at Banna. By the time of Monteith's return both Beverley and Casement had been arrested. Monteith was then in a most precarious position because if he fell into British hands he would most likely suffer the same fate as was to befall Casement. He managed to make his way to the Rink on Basin Road, Tralee where most of the Volunteers were gathered. At this stage Austin Stack had been arrested and his second in command Paddy Cahill seemed to be at a loss as to what to do. Later, Monteith stated in his memoirs that Cahill patently did not want to take responsibility in Stack's absence. It was while at the Rink that Monteith came in contact with Lieutenant Patrick Whelan when he was delivering MacNeill's countermanding order.

In any event Monteith managed to change his coat and cap and armed with a shotgun he marched out of Tralee with the party of Volunteers from the Ballymacelligott area. Only the Commander of the Ballymacelligott men, Tom McEllistrim and his Lieutenant, a man named Byrne, were aware of the identity of the stranger in their midst. The Tralee RIC scrutinised the Ballymacelligott party but owing to the incessancy of the downpour of rain



Daniel Bailey (Beverley) and Sir Roger Casement in the dock at Bow Street Police Court



Daniel Bailey

they failed to notice the stranger whom they were supposed to be searching for. By this means Monteith literally marched out under the noses of the RIC. They marched the four miles in the heavy rain to Ballymacelligott and Monteith was put up for the night in the McEllistrim household, where he slept in a bed for the first time in weeks. It was while he was staying at Tom McEllistrim's that he found out for the first time that the Rising had commenced in Dublin. On the Wednesday of Easter Week it was felt that the house was under suspicion, so Monteith was moved on to the home of a man named Lenihan. As was the case at McEllistrim's, Lenihan laid everything in his house at the disposal of the stranger even going the extent of cycling to Tralee to buy underwear for his guest. By Saturday 29 April it was believed that Lenihan's house had also come under suspicion so he was moved to a third house, the residence of a bachelor farmer in a very remote area in the mountains. Eventually, plans were finalised for taking Monteith

to Limerick where he felt he would have a better chance on account of his knowledge of the countryside.

Father O'Flaherty of Brosna arrived in a motorcar and drove the fugitive as far as Raheen, near Limerick city, where Monteith alighted. From Raheen Monteith made his way on foot through Roxborough, Ballysheedy, Drombanna and Bohercoyle. All the time he had to be especially careful to ensure that he passed no one on the road. He later recalled that he turned back if he saw people coming towards him. At Bohercoyle he emerged onto the main Tipperary road near Arrahill's public house¹ and he continued up through Newcastle until he came to Bart Laffan's farm at Roseville in Killonan. Laffan immediately invited Monteith to stay and placed his farm at his disposal. When news of arrests in Limerick became known Monteith was moved to a dugout built on Laffan's land. The dugout was situated in a double ditch on the boundary

between the townlands of Killonan and Keyanna. It was about a half a mile away from the dwelling house. Each night when it was felt that the coast was clear Monteith was brought into the Laffan's house at around midnight to be fed and warmed by the heat of the fire. It was also decided that Monteith would have to be out of the house before four o'clock because that was the time when police raids normally took place.

On Thursday night 11 May Monteith and Laffan decided that, as the weather was terribly wet and wild, the house would not be raided. Alas, despite the inclemency of the weather, it was the exact night that the police chose for a raid. The object of the raid was Laffan himself who was known to possess arms. Monteith was spirited into a loft where a sick herdsman, named Jimmy Collins,² was sleeping and he rolled under the bed. Jimmy Collins, who knew Monteith and his situation, took it in his stride and when an RIC man came to search the loft he was greeted by a vitriolic outburst. As the RIC man was poking under the bed where Monteith was hiding Jimmy Collins gave the unfortunate policeman a verbal broadside saying "leave my few ould things alone, sure aren't I bad enough without you poking at my few ould things". This verbal assault by a sixty-year old farm worker embarrassed the RIC man into hurrying his search.³ The result was that the search was less fastidious than it should have been and the policeman completely missed the 'fugitive' under the bed. He eventually withdrew from the loft without realising how close he was to capturing their 'quarry'. Eventually to draw the searchers away from the house Laffan undertook to reveal the hiding place of a revolver that he had hidden on the farm and when this was handed up the raiders were happy to call off the search. They then took Laffan, along with the 'surrendered' revolver, into Limerick where he was closely cross-examined by Sir Anthony Weldon. The raiders could never have known how close they were to capturing a man who at that stage was the most wanted man in Ireland. Incredibly Robert Monteith remained at Roseville for six months. All the Laffan family, their workmen and a number of their neighbours were aware of his presence but the authorities never got an inkling of his whereabouts.⁴ One aspect of life at the time, that made Monteith's existence even more precarious than



Austin Stack

it might otherwise have been, was the presence of British Army deserters in the countryside. This resulted in the Military authorities sometimes making raids in search of these men and there was always the danger that he might get picked up in one of these random raids. This threat was even greater at Killonan because the rail junction was always more likely to be searched for deserters. Monteith's luck held however but it was not until November before he could leave the area. Bart Laffan and his neighbour David Hennessey took Captain Monteith in a pony and trap as far as Ballyneety. There they were met by men in a motor car that took the Wicklow man as far as Cork where he stayed at the Capuchin monastery in Rochestown. Eventually when the arrangements were finalised he was placed on board a ship that took him to America where he was eventually joined by his wife and children in New York. The courage and heroism of Bart Laffan, a substantial farmer, married and of middle age reflected the classless struggle that was about to embrace the country. Laffan was a

most unlikely revolutionary, but he was a man in whom Robert Monteith had implicit trust. Sadly, after Monteith's departure to America their paths never crossed again as Robert Monteith returned to Killonan for the first time in 1947, some weeks after Bart Laffan's death.⁵

The only person to see action in the general Galtee area was an assistant creamery manager from Tipperary town named Michael O'Callaghan. O'Callaghan had a run in with a 'separation mob' on Tuesday 25 April 1916 while on the way to his home. As O'Callaghan was on his own he was perceived to be an easy target but his assailants did not realise that O'Callaghan was armed and prepared to use his gun. When he reached the shelter of his father's house, in Henry Street, the crowd in pursuit had grown a lot larger and much more aggressive. Seeing the desperate situation that he was in O'Callaghan drew his pistol and opened fire on his pursuers. Whether O'Callaghan meant only to frighten his pursuers is a moot point as a youth by the name of Ryan was wounded in the leg. If the RIC had shown little interest in O'Callaghan's discomfiture when he was being assailed they became extremely active when they realised that he was armed and had opened fire. They



Michael O'Callaghan

immediately surrounded his father's house and demanded that he surrender. They did not attempt to storm the house but they did cordon it off and waited for reinforcements.

O'Callaghan meanwhile managed to escape from the house and eventually when the police reinforcements raided the house the 'bird had flown'. He made his way on foot to the house of his cousin Peter Hennessey, who lived at Moanour, which although in the parish of Galbally, was in County Tipperary. Hennessey gave O'Callaghan shelter but it was only a matter of time until the net was closed. On Wednesday morning, 26 April, Sergeant O'Rourke⁶ and Constable Hurley, from Lisvernane Police Barracks, called to Hennessey's house. When O'Rourke was about to arrest the fugitive, O'Callaghan drew his revolver and opened fire and mortally wounded Sergeant O'Rourke. Constable Hurley fled from the house but O'Callaghan followed him and shot him in the farm yard. Hurley, who was a native of Castletownbere, was killed instantly and Sergeant O'Rourke was seriously wounded in the stomach. O'Rourke was later removed by ambulance to the Military hospital in Tipperary town where he died in the early hours of Saturday 29 April. Elsewhere in the townland of Moanour, Paul Merrigan, who was staying with his cousin Michael Merrigan, heard the shots fired by O'Callaghan. Merrigan rushed to Hennessey's house and he was the first person on the scene. When he arrived at Hennessey's he first saw Sergeant O'Rourke propped up in the kitchen, moaning with pain, and outside near a hayshed he saw the remains of Constable Hurley.⁷ A large force of policemen soon arrived from Tipperary and Merrigan along with Peter Hennessey, Hennessey's wife and a workman were arrested and questioned extensively but eventually they were released.

Again O'Callaghan found himself on the run. He went first to the townland of Annagh, near Galbally where he found shelter with the O'Dea family and where he stayed for at least the night of the shooting on Wednesday. From Annagh he made his way to his O'Callaghan cousins at Lackelly where he found shelter and where he stayed for some time. While he was at Lackelly the local IRA company, under Bill Fitzpatrick and with his cousins Michael and

Gerry O'Callaghan, mounted guard. Other members of the local company such as Danny Moloney, the Kincaids and the Taylors were also involved in looking after the fugitive. When it was decided to move him from Lackelly he was moved to the Glenbrohane area and he stayed for at least some of the time at Shanahans of Glenlara where his security was taken care of by the Shanahans and Ned Tobin. With the help of Tadhg Crowley, the O/C of the IRA in Ballylanders, whose father was the Postmaster in Ballylanders, telegrams to the local RIC were well vetted before they were handed on to the intended recipients. These messages were relayed to Shanahan's with the aid of two teachers, Michael Hannafin from Ballylanders and Paddy Shine from Glenbrohane.⁸ By this means O'Callaghan was able to stay one step ahead of any police raids.

Although there was a major hunt to effect his capture O'Callaghan managed to elude the police before he eventually escaped to America. It appears that O'Callaghan's escape route, like Robert Monteith's, was also in the guise of a 'Capuchin priest' traveling from Rochestown in Cork. Eventually the British authorities became aware of O'Callaghan's whereabouts in America, but all efforts to extradite him were thwarted and Michael O'Callaghan remained in America until after the Truce when he returned to Ireland.

Donal O'Hannigan from Anglesboro, who was a younger brother to Donnchadha O'Hannigan, was placed in charge of the Volunteers in county Louth in the run up to the 1916 Rising. The response to the Rising in county Louth, as was the case in most of the rest of the country, was very disappointing. Nonetheless, O'Hannigan with a party of about thirty men including Sean MacEntee, managed to take control of the village of Castle Bellingham and while there they captured an RIC patrol of twelve men and a number of parties of British Officers who were in transit to the Irish Grand National. In the course of this action one of the RIC men was killed.

After moving fairly freely throughout the countryside of county Louth for the week O'Hannigan eventually disbanded his men many of whom returned to their home areas to try and evade capture. O'Hannigan himself eventually made

his way back to his native Galtee area where he went on the run.⁹ While 'on the run' O'Hannigan stayed for some time at the home of Liam Lynch at Barnagurraha near Kilbehenny.¹⁰ It was at this time also that Donal O'Hannigan came into contact with Tadhg Crowley who came to meet him at Ballymahane Bridge while he was staying at Lynch's. Eventually O'Hannigan, who had previous experience as a sailor, managed to get a job on board ship and he spent much of his time plying between Ireland, Britain and America. He was instrumental in bringing arms and ammunition into Ireland for the IRA and because of his activities he earned the nickname 'the Atlantic Greyhound'.



Captain Robert Monteith

References

- 1 This business trades as O'Shea's public house today.
- 2 Captain Robert Monteith, *Casement's Last Adventure* (Dublin, 1953).
- 3 Anecdotal evidence given by Jim Laffan to the author in March 2006. This is broadly substantiated by Robert Monteith in his autobiography but Monteith says that the RIC man lit a number of matches but they failed to light because of their wet condition.
- 4 Anecdotal evidence given by Ms Jean Laffan to the author in February 2006.
- 5 Anecdotal evidence given by Jim Laffan to the author in March 2006.
- 6 Sergeant O'Rourke, although a native of Cork city, was buried at Clonbeg Graveyard in the Glen of Aherlow. It is one of the very few examples of RIC men, killed in action, being buried with the standard RIC official headstone.
- 7 Witness Statement W/S 1667 by Paul Merrigan (Bureau of Military History)
- 8 Witness Statement W/S 435 by Tadhg Crowley (Bureau of Military History)
- 9 Witness Statement W/S 161 by Donal O'Hannigan (Bureau of Military History)
- 10 Florence O'Donghue, *No Other Law* (Dublin 1954).