

# THE RATHKEALE WORKHOUSE INCIDENT, NOVEMBER, 1921

BY A. KINSELLA

**A**t the meeting of the Second Dáil, which was held in the Mansion House, Dublin, on the 16th and 17th of August, 1921, Alderman W.T. Cosgrave presented his report on the activities of the Sinn Féin Local Government Board. The *Irish Times* reported that one of the topics being dealt with was the abolition of the workhouses which "bred a peculiar race, people who had no civic pride or sense of civic responsibility. A great attempt was now being made to wipe out the workhouse, as it was known, and to provide instead, district hospitals and county homes for the aged and infirm". Despite the fact that war could be resumed at any moment, this proposal was implemented by the local government administration which largely owed allegiance to Sinn Féin outside Ulster. On 28 September, 1921, the *Irish Times* carried a report on a meeting between the Wexford Board Of Guardians and "a woman inspector of Dáil Éireann", who stated that "If it was possible, she would like to see all the old unions burned, but it was not practical politics". Subsequently, that newspaper carried reports of the occupation of the workhouse at Celbridge, County Kildare, the commandeering of the building in Carndonagh, County Donegal, by a crowd of 200, the presence of armed I.R.A. at the opening of Roscommon County Home and a question in the House of Commons on the occupation of Ballyshannon Workhouse, where a sentry was posted. In the report on the aftermath of the events covered in this article, the *Irish Times* of 26 November, 1921, said that the Rathkeale Workhouse had been occupied by a large force of the Irish Republican Army for a period of two months. The workhouse had been abolished under an amalgamation scheme and the inmates had been transferred to the County Hospital, Croom, and to the County Home, Newcastle West. The report was carried under the heading **BREACH OF THE TRUCE** and this note attempts to give some of the background to this incident which occurred at a critical juncture in the negotiations which were going on in London. Where possible, the original documentation is quoted verbatim and is largely self-explanatory.

The following handwritten unsigned and undated note is contained in a file entitled "Rathkeale Raid" which is held in the Military Archives, Cathal Brugha Barracks, Dublin.

## RATHKEALE WORKHOUSE

1. I received notification on 20th inst. from enemy G.H.Q. that they intended to occupy Rathkeale Workhouse by (sic) troops on 25th inst.
2. My Liaison Officer in Limerick was advised by Col. Wyatt (Enemy) that the building was to be taken over by British Forces at 10 a.m. on 25th inst.
3. Acting on instructions received I notified Enemy military L.O. at 2.00 p.m. on 24th inst. by phone that the building in question was occupied by our troops and that they would not vacate it. I suggested to him that they would cause something in the nature of a crisis. I requested an interview with Genl. Macready and was told that it was impossible.

I requested this interview thinking that difficulties likely to arise might be obviated. I emphasised the fact that in speaking to Col. Stewart I made it quite clear that if their attitude remained the same regarding the taking over of the building, there was bound to be friction. His attitude was that he was quite satisfied. From information received it is quite clear that the enemy had every intention of fulfilling their threat re occupation.

I was informed this morning at the Castle that during the night the building had been evacuated by our people and had been absolutely destroyed by fire. They allege that this was done by our forces. I was also informed that a wire had been received by British G.H.Q. at 8 p.m. last night 24th inst. from London. This wire instructed the British Military "to hold their hand for a few days re Rathkeale".

Seeing that they allege that the burning was an act perpetrated by our people, and in view of my warning during the day, it appears to me as gross neglect that I was not advised (sic) of a change in their attitude i.e. that is the altering of their ultimatum to occupy the building in question.

This incident of a wire arriving late corresponds with a similar occurrence in the Galway Prison Case. It appears to be a game to place us in the wrong and to give them every advantage regarding publicity. I consider it a case that should be shown up as we obviously have nothing to loose (sic).

This note was, almost certainly, written by Commandant Emmet Dalton, Acting Chief Liaison Officer, Óglaigh na hÉireann at his office in the Gresham Hotel, Dublin. In the note there is reference to Liaison Officers (L.O.), who had been appointed by both sides in the aftermath of the Truce, which had been agreed to take effect from 12 noon on Monday, 11 July, 1921, effectively ending the War of Independence. As Óglaigh na hÉireann had not been precluded from retaining their arms there was an obvious necessity for a mechanism which would sort out local difficulties and prevent hostilities breaking out as the result of such difficulties. General MacReady, General Officer Commanding, Ireland wrote, in his autobiography, *Annals of an Active Life*:

*I had hoped that the persons nominated to act in liaison with the General Officers throughout the country would have helped to smooth over the difficulties that arose almost daily, but unfortunately the men chosen by Sinn Féin for this work were persons who appeared determined to do everything to irritate and annoy the officers with whom they were in touch, losing no opportunity of posing to the public as the ruling power in the country. When complaints were brought to their notice, supported by reliable evidence, they dismissed them as devoid of any semblance of foundation without making an effort to ascertain the truth on their side.*

*Another difficulty with these Sinn Féin liaison officials was that they used letter-paper headed: "Irish Republican Army", and after their signatures added an Army rank, generally that of General. I passed word to the Divisional Generals that neither the I.R.A. nor any military rank could be recognised by us, because if the peace negotiations broke down, the Irish would at once argue that we had recognised their Army status and claim to be treated as belligerents ...*

*So difficult did the liaison business become, owing mainly to the selection by Sinn Féin of persons with whom it was impossible, even with the best of goodwill, to deal that it soon broke down so far as the Army was concerned, and communications were carried on through the civil authorities at the Castle ...*

*The Sinn Féin liaison people were known among ourselves as the "a charas" from an Erse expression with which they commenced their letters, and which was*

the sum total of the knowledge of the Erse language possessed by all but a very few of them.

This somewhat jaundiced view of the "a charas" and their work in the extremely difficult situation which prevailed in the period from the Truce to the Treaty was not shared by Dalton, who was not a man to suffer fools gladly. In his report to the Minister for Defence (Richard Mulcahy), when he relinquished his post in the Liaison Office, he is fulsome in his praise of the "competent and hard-working" staff with whom he worked. He said:

*In many cases, I regret to say, they were looked on by our own side as traitors on account of their association with the then British Enemy. Furthermore, in addition to their liaison work, many held minor commands in the Army, and while always in the unenviable position of peacemaker, they showed themselves capable of protecting the interests of the Army creditably, when the occasion arose.*

Some idea of the difficulties under which Liaison Officers worked can be gained from the fact that, as Tim Pat Coogan points out in his biography of Michael Collins, "nominal IRA strength was listed as 72363", while at the time of the Truce it stood at some three thousand. Dalton in his report refers to "a most unprecedented outburst of brigandism (which had swept) the whole country. Armed hold-up (sic) and motor thefts were of daily occurrence", while MacReady tells of the "everyday violation of the truce terms by de Valera's followers (which) was a constant source of trouble and anxiety up to the signing of the treaty ...".

A series of letters and memoranda in the Military Archives' file allows one to follow the sequence of events as they unfolded. The first letter, dated 10 November, 1921, is from the Chief of Staff (Mulcahy) to "Mick" and reads:

1. RATHKEALE WORKHOUSE: *The President spoke to myself and the Minister for Defence this evening with regard to Workhouse and he takes up the attitude that we must maintain that the Workhouses are the property of the people, and that "the guardians of the poor in the district are the real owners". They have to come to some decision on this point and he asked the Minister for Defence to have you sent a copy of this decision.*

*According to his ruling we cannot evacuate the Rathkeale Workhouse, in order to let the enemy in.*

*Further, as a counter-offensive in this matter he has arranged that the Minister for Defence will get the Minister for Local Government to get the Guardians of any Workhouse into which the Enemy have gone since the Truce, to send him (the Minister for Local Government) particulars of the case, with a view to having our Chief Liaison Officer demand evacuation.*

The reply, dated 11 November, was:  
RATHKEALE WORKHOUSE: *Yes, this*

*is quite alright, but if we, ourselves, evacuate the place - I mean if the Minister for Local Government, decided on the evacuation under his amalgamation of Union Scheme, where do the Guardians of the Poor come in then? Of course, we can say as much as we like that these buildings are our property - they say they are theirs. It seems to me it is scarcely worthwhile quarrelling on the words of the decision.*

The next document is a letter, dated 19 November, 1921, from Colonel E. Prout, Deputy Quarter Master General, General Headquarters, Ireland, which informs the Chief Liaison Officer that the workhouse is to be occupied by troops on 25 November, 1921. Captain O'Shaughnessy, Liaison Officer, at 93 O'Connell Street, Limerick, is informed of this intended move by British Forces in a letter from the Acting Chief Liaison Officer, which is dated 22 November, 1921. A memorandum which details the notes passed between the Liaison Office, the Chief of Staff and the Minister for Defence (Cathal Brugha), follows the notification of the intended occupation of the workhouse. In his communication to the Minister, Mulcahy writes:

*Rathkeale Workhouse is with my approval held by three rifle-men and 12 shotgun men, with the intention of holding it against the enemy, for such time as will permit of the building being destroyed rather than allow occupation. The Div. Comdt. 1st Southern Division was very emphatic that if they are to be expected to fight again in this area the enemy should not be allowed to occupy this building.*

*I did agree with the D/I 2 or 3 weeks ago that I would not advocate a fight on this question from a military point of view. The enemy decision is probably of political intent and I should be glad of instruction as to the steps which it is desired should be taken by us in this matter.*

The Minister replied on 23 November, 1921:

*The British should not be allowed to take possession. If necessary the intention mentioned by you at the beginning of this communication should be carried out. I am requesting M/Local Government to instruct the Local Guardians to inform the British that the building is their property and that they object to their taking possession of it.*

A handwritten comment in the margin of the latter communication reads, "The wording of this memo is most confusing", and is initialled J.E.D. (J. Emmet Dalton).

In a letter, dated 23 November, 1921, from the Liaison Office, 93 O'Connell Street, Limerick, the Liaison Officer, I.R.A., Commandant T.J. O'Shaughnessy, writes to the Chief Liaison Officer, Gresham Hotel, Dublin:

*I have yours of 22nd inst. re occupation of Rathkeale by enemy troops on 25th. I*

*have been already advised by Colonel Wyatt here that the buildings were to be taken over by the enemy at 10 a.m. on the date mentioned and I at once took up with the O/C West Limerick Brigade. I took up with Colonel Wyatt and represented to him that the occupation would be construed as a breach of the Truce particularly as the building was at present occupied by our men.*

A note card, headed Gresham Hotel, has the following handwritten message:

*20 lorries  
2 tanks  
2 armoured Cars  
Extra ration for men have gone to Mount-Brown.  
Phone message from I.O. Mid-Limerick at 7.30 p.m.*

On 24 November, Mulcahy wrote to the Chief Liaison Officer:

*Will you at once inform the enemy authorities that occupation of Rathkeale Workhouse by them cannot be concurred in by us.*

The next document in the series is  
REPORT - RATHKEALE  
WORKHOUSE

Adj. 1st Southern Division

*Rathkeale Workhouse was burned at 2.30 a.m. this morning by our forces. Military forces - 6 lorries, 1 armoured car and one tank, arrived from Limerick to Mountbrowne at 5.30 p.m. yesterday.*

*At 10 p.m. yesterday a message from the Liaison Officer, Limerick giving a copy of communication which he had received from O.C. enemy 18th Infantry Bde. Limerick, was received by Div. Adj. 1st Southern, intimating the fact that he intended adhering to his original decision to have the Workhouse taken over at 10 a.m. this morning.*

*Acting on this information I ordered the destruction of the Workhouse at 2.30 a.m. which was duly carried out.*

*At 9.25 a.m. the 25th inst. 2 armoured cars and 2 lorries, 1 Military lorry and one R.I.C. lorry arrived from Mountbrowne at the outer gate of the Workhouse, and after viewing the building from a distance of about 150 yards they returned in the direction of Mountbrowne.*

*At 9.45 a.m. two lorries of Military arrived from Newcastle West and proceeded towards Mountbrowne.*

The series of letters and memoranda ends with a letter, dated 30 November, 1921, from E.S. O'Dugain to Dalton which reads:

*RATHKEALE: I think we came very well out of this and can quite understand Macready's anxiety to avoid the issue.*

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