



Sean South's funeral cortege passing through O'Connell Street in Dublin in 1957. The image is taken from *Soldiers of Folly - The IRA Border Campaign 1956-1962*,

COURTESY: THE UNITED IRISHMAN

Sean South from Garryowen

■ 2017 marks the 60th anniversary of the famous New Year's Day raid that led to South's death

SEÁN SABHAT of Garryowen is a rousing ballad that stirs the blood in the Irish, every time it gets an airing. It was written by Limerick man Sean Costelloe, from Janesboro, to the air of Roddy Mac Corley another republican song. The Wolfe Tones made this song famous throughout the world. The song was also recorded by Scottish band Charlie and The Bhoys, Irish country singer Dermot O'Brien, Rebel group The Druids, and Blackthorn to name a few. It's one of the most recorded Irish rebel songs of all time.

As we approach the anniversary of Seán's death, I would like to recall his short life and times. The book *Awakening the Spirit of Freedom* edited by Des Long, is my main source of information, for this column. In the Introduction Des writes as follows: The song tells the story of the failed IRA raid on the Brookeborough RUC Barracks on New Year's Eve in 1957. The Volunteers were seen approaching the barracks and the RUC men inside opened fire. Seán Sabhat and his comrade Fergal Ó Hanlon from County Monaghan, were killed in the ensuing gun battle.

Seán was from No 47 Henry Street, and not Garryowen as stated in the song, (poetic licence) and he was born on February 8, 1928. He was educated at Sexton Street Christian Brothers School, and later worked as a clerk in a local wood-importing company called McMahon's. Seán was a devout Catholic, being a member of An Réalt (the Irish-speaking chapter of the Legion of Mary), and a conservative, even by the standards of the day. He was also a member of the Knights of Columbanus.

He had a great dedication to the Irish language, and spoke Irish whenever he could and encouraged others to do so. He wrote, illustrated and distributed a number of Irish publications. They were *An Gasóg Óg* for children, *An Giolla* and later *An Ghath*. He also wrote a weekly column in Irish for the Limerick Weekly Echo, and was a regular contributor to Rusc. He was president of An Realt and a member of Conrad na Gaeilge.

He had received military training as a



Then & Now

with Tom Aherne

lieutenant of the Irish army reserve, the LDF which would later become the FCA (An Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil or Local Defence Force), before he became a volunteer in the Irish Republican Army. He served during 1956 and 1957 during what was known as the Border Campaign by the IRA from 1956 - 1962.

The revolt in the North which began on December 12 1956 had quite a simple explanation: Britain's writ still ran in part of Ireland and British troops occupied it, Ireland could not be free until both were removed. Seán was a member of the Pearse Column from the day it was formed and was a Section Leader during all its operations.

Sabhat's Column decided to raid the barracks in Brookeborough on New Year's Day 1957 to secure much needed guns to resupply the Irish Republican Army which was running low on weaponry and ammunition. His column which consisted of 14 volunteers planned to detonate two improvised mines to breach the barrack's defences while the truck containing the rest of the raiders would pull up and secure the building and weapons.

However things went terribly wrong and the mines failed to detonate. This gave the RUC Officers inside time to return fire. Seán operated his Bren gun from the truck floor, so he could cover the other volunteers. Once the mines failed his position in the exposed truck was untenable, and a hail of bullets cut him down. When the botched raid was over volunteers Sabhat and O'Hanlon were seriously injured, and four other volunteers in the column were wounded.

'Twas on a dreary New Year's Day as the shades of night came down

A lorry load of volunteers approached a border town

There were men from Dublin and from Cork, Fermanagh and Tyrone

But the leader was a Limerick man, Seán Sabhat of Garryowen.

And as they moved along the street up to the barrack door

The scorned the danger they would meet, the fate that lay in store

They were fighting for old Ireland's cause to claim our very own

And the foremost of that gallant band was Sabhat of Garryowen.

But the sergeant foiled their daring plan, he spied them through the door

Then the sten guns and the rifles too, a hail of death did pour

And when that awful night was past two men were cold as stone

There was one from near the border and one from Garryowen.

Over 50,000 people came to Limerick City to attend Seán Sabhat's funeral at the republican plot in Mount Saint Lawrence Cemetery on January 5. It was the largest cortege the city had ever seen. When the hearse arrived near midnight on January 4, 20,000 were waiting to pay their respects. Many knelt in prayer, as they lined the street in pouring rain. During the long journey from the border, similar scenes were witnessed in cities, towns, villages, and townlands.

To his comrades Seán Sabhat was a man who never raised his voice, never got angry or annoyed, never complained and always spoke in Irish. One said of Seán that no job was too big for him, and none was ever too small. He would plot a movement on the map or clean the weapons, of

the Column. He would draw pictures for the little children in the houses, where he stayed and explain the meaning in the Irish language.

Over miles of rugged country during the long withdrawals, he carried his Bren gun, and he would help another less fit if the need arose. His tall spare body topped by red hair and the beard he grew, when the fight opened and said he would not shave till Ireland was free, is the picture his comrades carry of him now.

On January 1, 2015 a plaque was erected in his memory at 47 Henry Street, Limerick and it was unveiled by his comrade Padraigh Ó Reagáin. The following was included in the Commemorative Booklet:

It is with pride that Coiste Cuimneacháin Seán Sabhat are unveiling in memory of Seán Sabhat at this house at No 47 Henry Street where Seán was born raised by his mother Mary with his brothers Jim, and Gerrard and where he lived all his short life. It was here that Seán worked on his many articles and booklets, aimed at awakening the spirit of freedom in his fellow citizens, and country men and women. It was here too that he planned for his part in the on-going fight for Irish freedom.

No more he'll hear the seagull cry, o'er the murmuring Shannon's tide

For he fell beneath the northern sky, brave O'Hanlon at his side

He has gone to join that gallant band of Plunkett, Pearse, and Tone

A martyr for old Ireland, Seán Sabhat of Garryowen.

The book is a collection of articles on Seán Sabhat by people who were with him in the attack on Brookeborough RUC Barracks on January 1, 1957 when he and Fergal O'Hanlon were killed. The book also contains poetry, ballads, and a pen and ink drawing by Seán Sabhat. It also includes a photographic record of his funeral and many other articles, which will be of interest to those who wish to know about that period. To get a copy of the book people can forward € 10 which includes postage to the editor Des Long, 52 Shannon Banks, Corbally, Limerick.