

Riots at the Irish Volunteer Parade, 1915

A STORMY WHIT SUNDAY IN LIMERICK

A STIRRING episode in the early days of the Volunteer Movement in Limerick is recalled in the following article. Written by the late A. J. O'Halloran, it was first published in the "Limerick Chronicle," May, 1940.

As one who participated in the day's proceedings, I have often wondered as to the angle from which the future historian of the period would view the riots which took place in Limerick on Whit Sunday (May 23), 1915, and the significance he would attach to them. Hence perhaps it would be well to tell the actual story of the day's happenings while there are still amongst us scores of credible witnesses whose testimony cannot be gained.

PLOT FAILED

It is no exaggeration to state that the fate of the movement swung in the balance on that Whit Sunday, so much so, that if a plot which had been engineered had developed according to plan, the word "Fias" might have been written in the annals of the Irish Volunteers, and the current of subsequent Irish history would have flowed through quite a different channel.

As it was afterwards sought to represent this parade as a deliberate attempt to defy and exasperate public opinion, which was then pronounced "pro-Ally" if not pro-British, it should be recorded that it was brought about in an almost haphazard manner, and in this wise: Mr. Robert Monteth, who had taken an active part in training the members of the Dublin Brigade who were to be sent to the front, was acting as instructor to the Limerick Regiment. He had been Captain of a Coy. (Dublin), with very popular. They naturally resented his victimisation by the British Government, and resolved, as a gesture of protest, to travel to the City of the Violated Treaty as a parade before their old commander as an armed unit. In order to carry out this project they decided to organise an excursion by rail on Whit Sunday. Naturally, they pushed the sale of tickets amongst the other companies of their Brigade, with the result that the idea of an armed parade in Limerick caught the imagination not only of the Volunteers in the Metropolis, but also of those elsewhere, and so Cork and Tipperary were also represented at that occasion. No attempt was made to make it a general parade and it was learned that other counties had felt that an opportunity to participate had not been afforded them.

At all events, it would not have been possible as such a late stage to alter the proposed route of march without loss of prestige, and so it was decided to adhere to it. Later in Whit-Sun week, Limerick Headquarters learned that from some mysterious source large sums of money had materialised to provide the dress of the population with intoxicating drink on the day of the parade. The object was patent. Take an unpopular cause and a liquor, and no one can foretell what serious consequences may ensue. The plot failed, but the plotters did not blame their dupes; it was the wonderful discipline of the Irish Volunteers that failed it. Certain specific instances of how the hidden hand worked might be given, but, since many of the dupes afterwards made noble amends, no useful purpose could be served by doing so.

STRONG PARADE

Altogether, there were about 1,200 in the parade, which started according to schedule, and as, headed by the band of the Limerick Regiment, they passed through the streets of the city they should have inspired the respect, if not the admiration, of the citizens. Yet—and it may be difficult for the present generation to realise the regard with which they were regarded by the man-of-the-street of the vilest type. This was the inspired propaganda. Many of the Volunteers wore broken boots and shabby attire because their scanty earnings were being carried, but in the eyes of the populace they were traitors whose pockets were lined with German gold. Amongst the men who marched on that day were Padraig Pearse, Tom Clarke, Willie Pearse, Liam Mellows, Sean McDermott, Ned Daly, Terence McSwiney, George Clancy, Thomas McCurtain and scores of others who were destined before long to make the supreme sacrifice for Ireland.

SPECIAL CONTINGENTS

Two special trains carrying six hundred Volunteers with hundreds of sympathisers and others arrived from Dublin. A special also ran from Cork with some two hundred and fifty men, while Tipperary was represented by one hundred and fifty, chiefly drawn from the famous Galtee Regiment. It is significant that another special from Dublin brought a battalion of British soldiers to augment an already strong garrison. The arrangements for the day's proceedings were as follows: The parade was to form on Pery Square at one o'clock, and after traversing the main arteries of Newtown, O'Connell Avenue, and Boherbuidhe, pass through the Irish and English Towns, New (now Sarsfield) Military Barracks, overlooking that thoroughfare, were filled with British soldiers who, in their own inimitable lingo, jeered at the Volunteers. In view of the meticulous care the British military authorities invariably took to secure that the rank-and-file did not indulge in political manifestations, it seems significant that on this occasion they were permitted to do so unchecked.

ROUGH PASSAGE

The march along the Boherbuidhe district was through a barrage of abuse from thousands of excited females, who hurled at the Volunteers such taunts, and reproaches as only the fertile wit of womankind can coin, but the men marched on with scarce a glance to right or left. It was not until the head of the column reached the Irish Town that signs of a more malignant hostility became apparent. Mungret Street, the chief thoroughfare, is one of the oldest streets in the city, and behind it, on either side, lie the slum areas of Watergate and Palmers-town, which were wont to furnish some of the finest fighting material of the famous Munster Fusiliers. The inhabitants, who banked masses on both sides of the narrow street scarce suffered a passage for the marching men,

WOMEN ATTACKED

But indications were soon forthcoming that the plotters had not yet abandoned the hope of achieving their object. Bands of intoxicated rowdies of both sexes roamed through the city attacking and maltreating not only the Volunteers but lady visitors, many of whom had no special sympathy with the "Sinn Feiners," but had simply taken advantage of the cheap rail excursions. Each of the four companies of the Limerick Regiment had taken turns in mounting guard over the arms stacked at the Pery Square, and it was found necessary in consequence of reports arriving there, to dispatch detachments of Volunteers to protect the visitors from violence. In this connection it should be recorded that an officer of the Dublin Brigade, a Capt. Eamonn de Valera, on going to

Group of Limerick and Clare Volunteers released from Mountjoy Jail after successful hunger strike, September, 1918.

were not content with verbal compliments, but brought bottles, stones, and other missiles to reinforce them. They had been told that these men had cheered and gloated over every disaster that had befallen the Volunteers in the war, which was then raging, and so their hearts were filled with bitter hatred of the pro-German Sinn Feiners, as they called the Irish Volunteers. It was calculated by the plotters that Mungret Street, that street from which the women of 1690 had helped to hurl back the storm troops of William of Orange, would be the scene of an incident that would start a general conflagration. Some broke through the ranks, some Volunteers would lose his head, shots would be fired, a general melee would ensue, and the tragedy of Bachelors' Walk would be repeated on a larger scale. Then what more simple? Irish public opinion being what it was at the time would not only demand but insist that the Volunteers should be disarmed. One can only speculate as to whether the ultimate result might have been that the plotters failed to take into account one very important factor—the morale of the Volunteers, and so, as oblivious of missiles as of insults, the green-clad ranks swept through the hostile mob with as much sangfroid as if bouquets were being showered on them, and their lines remained unbroken. The remainder of the parade to Pery Square passed without incident. Owing to the fact that specially Park gates had been kept closed on that day, it was not found feasible to hold the projected review. The visitors marched to the Pery Square, and having stacked arms, proceeded to seek refreshments and to indulge in sight-seeing. Now that the parade was over, it was considered that all danger of a disturbance had passed, and the Volunteers generally were inclined to take a humorous view of the day's proceedings. They felt convinced that time was on their side, and that in a short space the people would be with them.

The assistance of some ladies who were attacked by a mob in Pery Street, was compelled to take refuge with them in a nearby licenced premises, whence they were rescued by a squad of Limerick Volunteers. Let it also be recorded that it was not until the Volunteers had been ordered to fix bayonets and load rifles that the mob could be brought to see reason. And at this time a number of members of the R.I.C. stood by, either unable or unwilling to intervene. In the meantime the instigators of the disturbances took advantage of a trifling incident to inflame public feeling to fever heat. An inquisitive urchin had got into the line of fire when an enthusiastic "pro-Ally" hurled a bottle at a Volunteer, with the result that his head was badly gashed. Hundreds who had not witnessed the incident saw the boy, covered with blood being rushed to hospital, and the story spread like wildfire that he had been shot by the "Sinn Feiners." Before another hour had passed an attack on the Volunteers, were used into a score of men, women and children shot down in cold blood. The result was that thousands of decent men who would never have countenanced an attack on the Volunteers, were stirred to frenzy, vowed vengeance on the "murderers" and thronged the approaches to the Railway Terminus with the idea of wreaking it on the departing visitors.

A BIG PROBLEM

It was now realised by Colonel Colivet and the staff of the Limerick Regiment that the Dublin, Tipperary and Cork contingents were sorely provoked, and trained without provoking a serious conflict. The tempers of the rank-and-file of the local Volunteers were sorely frayed, not on their own account, but that they bitterly resented the treatment shown to their brothers-in-arms, and so perhaps great order to deal drastically with the perpetrators of the day's outrages was not have been a welcome to them. For this reason it was considered prudent to keep them standing to arms at the Pery Square, and that in a short space the people would be with them. It would not be possible for them to entrain without resorting to violence. The Limerick Volunteers were rushed at the double towards the scene and had almost reached their objective when a messenger from Padraig Pearse intercepted them with word to the effect that all was well and that their services would not be required. What had actually happened was the several of the local clergy, being apprised of the danger, hurried to the terminus and used their influence to quell the passions of the mob. Chief amongst them was Rev. Father Mangan, C.S.S.R., who was then Director of the Arch-Confraternity of the Holy Family, and who, apart from the powerful influence he wielded by virtue of that position, was personally very popular with the people generally. Mounting on the sidecar, he appealed to such members of the Confraternity as were on the scene to help to secure the safe departure of the visitors. His appeal was successful and they co-operated with the members of the R.I.C. who were present, under District Inspector Craig, in forming a passage through which the Volunteers and their friends entered the terminus. But even then some of the hoodlums, encoined behind the cordons, struck and injured a number of the Volunteers and tore nine or ten rifles from their hands. These guns were subsequently recovered, through the influence, I think, of Father Mangan, and were returned to their owners.

SUMMING UP

This, then, is the true story of the Whit Sunday riots, to which surviving Volunteers can bear testimony, and will, furthermore, be prepared to bear witness that if I have erred in the narration it has been on the side of moderation. In the years to follow, many of the men who took part in that historic parade were to give evidence of their selfless love of country, of their courage and daring in the face of overwhelming odds, but on that day they were disciplined soldiers whose bearing under very great provocation could not have been surpassed by any body of veteran troops in the world.

PORT OF LIMERICK

Arrivals: Kurt Bastian (Mantyluoto), sawn wood and sundries; Burgwall (Helsinki), sawn wood and sundries; Maria Flore (Casablanca), pollard; Oranmore (Liverpool), general; Roscrea (Swansea), coal; Irish Holly (Stanlow), aviation fuel; Caltex Whitegate (Whitegate), heavy fuel oil, motor spirit and gas oil; Ann Nabal (St. John, N.B.), timber; Dromineer (Antwerp and Rotterdam), general; Bicalair (Liverpool via Galway), do. Sailings: Cameo (London), light; Oranmore (Liverpool via Fenit), general; Roscrea (Dunkirk), light; Kurt Bastian (Partinnton), do.; Marie Flore (Swansea), do.; Irish Holly (Whitegate), do.; Burgwall (Archangel), do.; Caltex Whitegate (Whitegate), do.; Dromineer (Antwerp and Rotterdam via Fenit and London), general.

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