Tan atrocity that led to Truce: book

IT IS GENERALLY believed that a shoot-out at what is now Hickey's Bar in Castleconnell, in which two RIC men and the man who served them drinks, were killed by Black-and-Tans in a tragic mistake, led to the conference which ended the Troubles, says a newly-published history of Castleconnell.

The bar at that time—21—was known as the Shannon Hotel, originally one of seven in Castleconnell to cater for anglers from all over Britain and the Continent.

The 50-page history and walking guide to Castleconnell, in which the incident is recalled, has been compiled and published by the local ICA guild.

The Troubles, says the historical section of the work, was a time when some great local mansions such as The Hermitage and Mountshannon, were burned down: both were seen as symbols of oppression—in fact, one was owned by an Irish-American and the other by a family which adored, and gave hospitality to, the great Irish bard, Turlough O'Carolan.

The incident of the shooting at what is now Hickey's Bar, says the booklet, was one which was to have historical repercussions.

"On a Sunday evening on 17th April, 1921, three off-duty RIC men cycled out of Killaloe for a drink at the Shannon Hotel in Castleconnell," it records.

"They were served by Denis O'Donovan, a man of Nationalist back-ground but esteemed by all, who stayed and chatted with them. Someone, it seems, sent word to the Black-and-Tans in Newport that three Sinn Feiners' were drinking in the hotel. Soon the hotel was surrounded by Crown Forces, armed with machine guns.

"Several groups of them rushed into the hotel, shouting that the 'Sinn Feiners' must surrender. The RIC men had no time to explain: they drew their guns and defended themselves. In the end, two were killed and the third escaped.

Military inquiry

"Mr. O'Donovan was overlooked, accused of 'harbouring rebels' and pumped full of bullets in sight of his wife and children.

Mr. O'Donovan was father of Dermot G. O'Donovan, the prominent Limerick solicitor, now retired, and grandfather of Derry O'Donovan, who continues the family legal practice, and P.D. founder and leader, Desmond O'Malley, T.D.

The history continues: "A military inquiry glossed over the affair, saying Mr. O'Donovan had been killed accidentally in the course of the attack. But on April 20, the very day on which the military inquiry was concluded, Lord Parnell raised the matter in the House of Lords, quoting at length from letters from his brother, who had been in the hotel at the time and had himself been threatened by the attackers. His eye-witness account utterly exploded the official story."

Although the House of Lords agreed that scandalous crimes were being committed in Ireland in the name of law and order, no action was taken on Lord Parnell's request for a public inquiry.

"But it is generally believed that it was this incident which led Lloyd George to seek a conference with the Irish leaders, shortly thereafter, which led to the signing of the Treaty."

The Shannon Hotel was noted for the many titled people who came for the fishing to Castleconnell. King George V is said to have come incognito, while other visitors included Lord Iveagh, Lord Kinmont of Kilonan Castle, Lord Ainsworth of Adare, and ambassadors from as far afield as Canada, Switzerland and Japan.

The booklet, well-researched and very readable, points out that Mountshannon, the great mansion which had burned down during the Troubles, had burned down, was owned by a wealthy Irish-American, Thomas Nevins. The other mansion burned, The Hermitage, was a stop-over for the great Irish bard, Turlough O'Carolan, where his resident admirer, Dean Massey of Limerick, had the only life portrait of him painted—it is now in the National Gallery. The Masses had a bedroom in the house named after O'Carolan.

The house fell vacant in 1916 on the death of Baron Massey.

The guide to Castleconnell deals with the village and approaches in fair detail, but there are extensive appendices, treating of the Castle and the Bourke family which lived there, the Spa, the fishing, the churches, the fauna and flora and sections devoted to the Finn, the local bog, poetry and travellers' descriptions.

 Altogether a worthwhile contribution to the archives of the Limerick Region.

-Paddy Moroney.