IRA ambush of train at Meelick to be commemorated

Mike Dwane

HISTORIAN Tom Toomey says it was an ‘act of heroism’ that led to the death of IRA volunteer Michael Courtney at Meelick in the six days of the War of Independence.

The actions of the Conderagh man and of his comrades during a failed ambush on a train on June 15, 1921, are to be commemorated at Meelick next weekend. Mr Toomey, author of “The War of Independence in Limerick 1912-1921”, said that many of the actions of the East Clare IRA during the conflict were cleared out so close to the city that they could equally be regarded as Limerick actions.

It was Michael Gleeson’s Caherdavin company who planned to raid the train from Limerick to Ennis that day. They had hoped to intercept mail that might reveal the identity of a suspected spy.

Further background was the death in Spike Island of two weeks before of an IRA captain from Meelick, Patrick White. “Men were playing hurling in the yard and he went to retrieve a sliotar that went too close to the wire. He asked a sliotar if he could get the ball; your man told him go ahead, but when he did he opened fire and shot him,” said Mr Toomey.

Decided on raiding the train, the one thing the IRA men could not be certain of was whether there would be British soldiers on board. Tom Bentley from Cratloe rode the train and was to wave his cap out the window to warn the IRA.

Thirty volunteers from the Royal Scots boarded the train at Limerick; Bentley gave the warning; and the train driver, an IRA sympathiser, plotted through the stone barricade laid across the track at Cratloe. The driver was ordered to reverse back along the line and the IRA, realising they had been spotted, set about cutting communications.

“They should have all just got out of there but everything that could have gone wrong did go wrong,” says Tom Toomey. They tried to cut the wires and the wirecutters broke so they went looking for another. In the meantime, the train was back down on top of them and soldiers opened fire.”

Christopher McCarthy, from Miltown Malbay, was killed in that burst and Gleeson, “who had actually found cover, ran off to assist him. He was helping him back up the field to get away when he was himself seriously wounded. The British got to them and finished them and the two bodies were taken on to Ennis.”

This, Tom Toomey says, was only one action of the East Clare brigade to have taken place within a few miles of Limerick.

When a British plane crashed-landed at Coonagh in November 1920, a detachment of soldiers was sent from the Strand Barracks to protect the site, near the north exit of the Limerick tunnel.

Two soldiers, Sargent John and Robins, were killed by the IRA and in a reprisal the following night, soldiers from the same barracks shot at Iveragh in Limerick.

Two police men were also killed near the Limerick Inn when the IRA attacked an RIC lorry in January 1920.

While Kevin Myers and others have taken to writing that commemorations of the Old IRA are inappropriate in a new era for Anglo-Irish relations, Tom Toomey and the Meelick committee feel it is only right to honour them.

“We have got a move on, yes, but moving on does not mean you throw away your history and your heritage into a bucket. This is what happened. Tom O’Toole on the committee is not out there ranting and raving about what the British did to his grandnephew who was killed in Meelick. But this is our history and we should be proud of it.”

The Meelick Ambush Commemoration Committee – which is non-political - is inviting people to attend the ceremony after 12 noon on Sunday, June 26 and a monument to McCarthy and Gleeson will be unveiled at Woodcock Hill Road.

As well as Mr Toomey and Mr Gleeson, the ceremony includes John White, Mr O’Rourke and Cllr Cathal Crowe.