

# POLICE FATALITIES NEAR TIMOLEAGUE

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A total of fifty-six members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) were killed in West Cork during the War of Independence and its immediate aftermath.<sup>1</sup> This figure includes twenty members of the regular or ‘old’ RIC, fifteen temporary constables of the RIC Reserve Force, commonly called ‘Black and Tans’, and twenty-one members of the Auxiliary Division of the RIC (ADRIC), commonly called ‘Auxiliaries’ or ‘Auxies’. The first RIC member killed in West Cork was Constable Edward Bolger from Kilbrittain Barracks who was ambushed on his way to work on 14 December 1919.<sup>2</sup> The last RIC man killed in West Cork – and possibly the whole of Ireland – before the Truce was Constable Alexander Clarke from Skibbereen Barracks.<sup>3</sup> He was ambushed and killed on the morning of 11 July 1921.<sup>4</sup> The Truce commenced that same day at twelve noon. However, in the following year, 1922, two more RIC members were attacked and killed in West Cork: District Inspector Michael Keany in Clonakilty and former Constable Timothy O’Leary near Kilbrittain.<sup>5</sup> An analysis of the profiles of the twenty regular RIC policemen killed shows that the majority of them were married men with families and that the average age at death was almost fifty years.<sup>6</sup> They had completed, on

average, twenty-five years of police service, with the longest-serving member – Constable Clarke – thirty-four years in the force; all belonged to the Roman Catholic faith.<sup>7</sup>

The killing of three policemen near Timoleague on Monday, 10 May 1920 signalled the greatest loss of life suffered by the regular RIC in a single ambush in West Cork. On that day, a foot patrol of four policemen attached to Timoleague Barracks in the Clonakilty RIC District – on their way south to investigate a report of agrarian disturbance in the vicinity of Ardgehane – was ambushed by a party of eleven Irish Republican Army (IRA) men near Ahawadda Crossroads, about 3km from Timoleague. It was a bogus call-out; local members of the IRA had driven cattle belonging to a loyalist farmer off his land and the IRA had correctly surmised that the police would come and investigate the incident.<sup>8</sup> The three RIC men killed were: Sergeant John Flynn, Constable Edward Dunne and Constable William Brick.

Sergeant John Flynn, was a native of Kildysart, Co. Clare, aged approximately fifty and married with three young children.<sup>9</sup> He had been in the force for about twenty-five years and was a farmer before joining. He was promoted to sergeant in July 1916. He had served eight years in Timoleague and, previous to this, was stationed in Ballingurteen Barracks.

Constable Edward Dunne came from Maryborough in Queen's County (now Portlaoise, Co. Laois). He was thirty-two years of age and married with two young children. He had served thirteen years in the force, having joined in May 1907.<sup>10</sup>

Constable William Brick was a native of Tralee, Co. Kerry. He was thirty-two years old and was single. He had completed almost twelve years of police service, having joined in July 1908. Before joining, he was a postman.<sup>11</sup>

Temporary Constable Arthur Grimsdale (a Black and Tan), the fourth member of the patrol, was wounded but escaped from the ambush. He was a soldier in World War I, receiving a number of medals for bravery including the 1914 Star (i.e. the Mons Star). He had joined the force only a short time before the ambush, and was deployed to Timoleague Barracks.<sup>12</sup>

Earlier in 1920, Sergeant Flynn and Constable Dunne played prominent parts in the defence of Timoleague Barracks when it was attacked by a large group of armed IRA men on the night of 25 February.<sup>13</sup> That attack was in

progress for about three and a half hours. Although the windows were shattered and parts of the building damaged by gunfire, the attackers failed to capture it. Both Flynn and Dunne were subsequently awarded the Constabulary Medal in recognition of their efforts in defending the barracks. On that same night, Constable Brick was engaged in the defence of Mountpleasant Barracks (near Bandon), where he was stationed at the time.<sup>14</sup> It was attacked by a large number of armed IRA men equipped with bombs and guns. Previous to this, he had been stationed in Courtmacsherry Barracks which was evacuated earlier in the year.<sup>15</sup> The attack on Timoleague Barracks was led by Commandant Seán Hales of Ballinadee Company, Officer Commanding (O/C) First (Bandon) Battalion of the Third Cork Brigade; his brother, Commandant Tom Hales, the Brigade O/C, was in charge of the Mountpleasant attack, along with Brigade Adjutant Liam Deasy and Brigade Vice O/C Commandant Ted O'Sullivan from the Fifth (Bantry) Battalion.<sup>16</sup>

On the Sunday morning following the killing of the three policemen from Timoleague Barracks, the then parish priest of Timoleague, Fr Timothy O'Hea, speaking at Mass, condemned the ambush as the work of 'merciless, cruel, callous assassins'.<sup>17</sup> Some people, he noted, would claim that Sergeant Flynn and his three companions were doing the work of England; however, he defended them stating 'They were police officers doing their work, protecting the lives and the properties of people and their shooting, far from being justified, was as cold blooded and atrocious an act as was ever committed in a civilised community'.<sup>18</sup> In the days after this sermon, Fr O'Hea was visited by members of the local IRA company who warned him to tone down his sermons and to stop the condemnation of the Volunteers. A journalist, living in the locality, had forwarded the text of the priest's sermon to the press; he too was given a warning regarding the content of his future dispatches.<sup>19</sup> In the Pro-Cathedral in Skibbereen, the Bishop of Ross, the Most Rev. Dr Kelly, addressed the congregation, 'This attack on these innocent policemen made my blood creep, it was callous, wicked murder, it was slaughter'.<sup>20</sup>

The inquest into the deaths of the RIC men was held on Tuesday, 11 May 1920, in Timoleague Courthouse; it resulted in a verdict of 'wilful murder by the perpetrators'.<sup>21</sup> A harrowing account of the proceedings was published in detail in the local newspapers. The *Cork Examiner* reported, 'At the close

of the inquest a pathetic scene was witnessed. A sister of Constable Dunne was present and wept profusely, while a Constable broke down completely in sorrow for his dead comrades'.<sup>22</sup> The newspaper related how the remains of the policemen had been conveyed to Timoleague Courthouse where they 'lay on bags on the floor and covered with a rough cloth. There were traces of blood on the stairs and near the corpses and the scene resembled that of a slaughterhouse'.<sup>23</sup> The ambush party had been armed with shotguns – save for three of the leaders who had rifles – and these weapons caused horrific injuries when discharged at close range.

Temporary Constable Grimsdale, the sole survivor of the ambush, gave a graphic account of his recollection of the incident. He told of hearing shots, most of which seemed to come from a clump of furze bushes on the raised ground on the left-hand side of the road, and then two of his comrades were hit. He and Constable Dunne ran for whatever cover they could find. The firing continued and they both fell. He recounted:

Constable Dunne was struck that time, but he managed to rise and run and I crept into the side of the road. While I was there, I saw Constable Dunne run about twenty yards, when he was again struck, and he fell for the second time at the spot where he was later found dead.<sup>24</sup>

District Inspector Henry Connor was in charge of the RIC District of Clonakilty. In his evidence to the inquest jury (which also appeared in detail in the *Cork Examiner*), he explained that on 10 May, he had been on a routine visit to Timoleague Station when word came through that the patrol had been ambushed near Ahawadda Crossroads.<sup>25</sup> Accompanied by a police party, he immediately proceeded to the area. About 60yds (c. 55m) from the crossroads, on the Clonakilty side, he saw the body of Constable Dunne, lying on the grass verge on the left-hand side of the road. His feet were towards the ditch and his head towards the road. He had a gaping wound in his neck and was 'quite dead'. About 90yds (c. 82m) further on, in the Clonakilty direction, he saw the body of Constable Brick lying in a pool of blood almost in the middle of the road. His feet were towards the north and his head towards the south, and he too was 'quite dead'. Beside the body of Constable Brick, the witness found a boot which he believed belonged to Sergeant Flynn. He saw

bloodstains leading from here to a point about 10–12yds (c. 9–11m) further on where it appeared that someone had climbed over the ditch and slipped or fell down into the field at the northern side of the road. The witness saw some constables searching inside the ditch and at a point about 200yds (c. 183m) away he saw a constable pick up a cap belonging to Sergeant Flynn. It was found near a stream and shortly afterwards the body of the sergeant was discovered almost completely submerged in the stream with his head towards the west. The witness helped to remove the body to the bank; Sergeant Flynn was ‘quite dead’ at that time.

The ambush party had been in position since early morning and comprised eleven Volunteers drawn from two neighbouring IRA units: three from Kilbrittain Company and eight from Barryroe Company. In his witness statement, the O/C of Barryroe Company, James Moloney,<sup>26</sup> named the following as being present:

Commandant Charlie Hurley, Vice O/C Bandon Battalion,  
Kilbrittain Company  
Jack Fitzgerald, Captain, Kilbrittain Company  
James O’Mahony, Captain, Kilbrittain Company  
James Moloney, O/C Barryroe Company  
Michael Coleman, First Lieutenant, Barryroe Company  
Daniel Santry, Second Lieutenant, Barryroe Company  
John Hayes, Volunteer, Barryroe Company  
Timothy Crowley, Volunteer, Barryroe Company  
Batt Whelton, Volunteer, Barryroe Company  
Jerome O’Hea, Volunteer, Barryroe Company  
Denis O’Brien, Volunteer, Barryroe Company

Scouts were not named in any of the witness statements by ambush participants: James O’Mahony,<sup>27</sup> James Moloney,<sup>28</sup> Denis O’Brien<sup>29</sup> and Michael Coleman; however, Coleman did state that one scout was present.<sup>30</sup> John O’Driscoll, Captain, Timoleague Company, in his witness statement, named as a scout John Moloney, Ballygarvan, Volunteer in Timoleague Company.<sup>31</sup>

At the inquest in Timoleague Courthouse, the presiding coroner was Richard Neville, solicitor, from Bandon. Also present were: Divisional Commissioner C. H. O'Hara, District Inspector Henry Connor (see above) and District Inspector G. Patrick from Bandon RIC District.<sup>32</sup> A list containing the names of fourteen jurors summoned to attend was published. These were: Benjamin Lovell (foreman), Jeremiah Ryan, John F. Stanley, James Walsh, James Murphy, Patrick Ryan, Daniel O'Leary, Richard Collins, Thomas J. Hegarty, Jeremiah O'Sullivan, James Fehilly, Michael Marlborough, Cornelius Mahony and Timothy Sexton.<sup>33</sup>

In the RIC's *Summaries of Outrages*<sup>34</sup> and in the County Inspector's Report for May 1920,<sup>35</sup> a James Whelton was also named as one of the jurors. It was stated that James Whelton and his wife were kidnapped by the IRA and held hostage until the jury's verdict of 'wilful murder by perpetrators' was withdrawn and replaced by a verdict of 'killed by persons unknown'. The jury members had received typed copies of a notice informing them that they had been tried and found guilty of treason; it warned them that if they failed to publish an apology in the press and express sorrow to the Irish Republic they would have to 'bear the consequences'. A notice was subsequently placed in local newspapers withdrawing the original finding of the jury, and replacing it with that suggested by the IRA.<sup>36</sup> In the County Inspector's Report for June 1920, it stated that the Wheltons were released, unharmed, after a number of days.<sup>37</sup> William Foley, from Timoleague Company and Engineer in the Third Cork Brigade, in his witness statement, described the arrest and detention of the Wheltons. They were held in captivity near Tinker's Cross in the Bandon area 'on suspicion of giving information to the British authorities'.<sup>38</sup>

Since James Whelton's name did not appear on the original list of summoned jurors, it is most likely that he was drafted in as a replacement jury member as a result of the non-appearance of one of the selected jurors.<sup>39</sup> This would have been commonplace in the summer months of 1920 when intimidation of jurors was widespread throughout the country, especially so in West Cork. A clear example of this intimidation occurred during the inquest in Bantry town into the killing of Temporary Constable Thomas King on the Bantry to Glengarriff road on 12 June 1920. The inquest had to be adjourned since only three jurors answered the roll-call.<sup>40</sup> The killing of Constable James Brett, at Clonee on the

main Bantry to Durrus road on 21 June 1920, had further consequences – not only were the majority of jurors marked absent on the day of the inquest but after the funeral mass in Bantry parish church, it proved impossible to find a driver for the hearse to convey the coffin to the abbey cemetery. As a result, the coffin was borne on the shoulders of Brett's colleagues as far as the police barracks. An inquest into the killing of Constable James Murray as he walked alone down Main Street in Clonakilty on 27 July 1920 had to be adjourned when only one juror turned up.<sup>41</sup> The intimidation of jurors, coupled with the ostracisation of police in their local communities, the burning of courthouses, the setting up of *Sinn Féin* courts and the formation of a Republican alternative police force, resulted in the total collapse of the legal justice system, including the court system. As a consequence of these events, the coroner's inquest which required a civilian jury to attend was replaced for the remainder of the War of Independence with a military court of inquiry made up of military and police.

In the immediate aftermath of the Ahawadda ambush, Timoleague Barracks was evacuated by the RIC. On the night of 3 December 1920, it was demolished in a combined operation by Timoleague and Barryroe IRA companies. Timoleague Castle was also badly damaged that night by a mine explosion and the nearby residence of Colonel Travers, a loyalist, was burned to the ground. These properties were destroyed by the IRA since it was anticipated that they would be used to house enemy military forces.<sup>42</sup>

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Kingston, D. 2013. *Beleaguered: A History of the RIC in West Cork in the War of Independence*. Skibbereen, p. 191; *Cork Examiner*, 12 July 1921; *Cork County Eagle and Munster Advisor*, 16 July 1921.
- 2 *Irish Times*, 16 Dec. 1919.
- 3 *Freemans Journal*, 12 July 1921; Myers, K. *Irish Independent*, 22 June 2011.
- 4 *Southern Star*, 16 July 1921.
- 5 Kingston, *Beleaguered*, Appendix A, p. 211.
- 6 Kingston, *Beleaguered*, p. 191.
- 7 Kingston, *Beleaguered*, p. 191; *Cork Examiner*, 12 July 1921; *Freemans Journal*, 12 July 1921.
- 8 WS No. 1254: Michael Coleman. *Witness Statements* (WS). Bureau of Military History (BMH).
- 9 Herlihy, J. 1997. *The Royal Irish Constabulary: A Short History and Genealogical Guide*. Dublin, p. 178.

- 10 Abbott, R. 2000. *British Casualties in the War of Independence*. Cork, p. 75-6.
- 11 *Nenagh News*, 15 May 1920; *Killarney Echo and South Kerry Chronicle*, 15 May 1920; *Skibbereen Eagle*, 9 Oct. 1920.
- 12 HO 904/184/48-51. *RIC General Register*. The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.
- 13 Kingston, *Beleaguered*, p. 104.
- 14 *Irish Independent*, 27 Feb. 1920; BMH WS No. 1478: Ted O'Sullivan.
- 15 BMH WS No. 1341: Dan Holland; BMH WS No: 1306: Denis O'Brien.
- 16 BMH WS No. 1478: Ted O'Sullivan.
- 17 *Leinster Leader*, 11 Jan. 1997.
- 18 *Cork Examiner*, 12 May 1920; see also *Leinster Leader*, 11 Jan. 1997.
- 19 BMH WS No. 792: Tadhg O'Sullivan.
- 20 *Cork Examiner*, 12 May 1920; see also *Leinster Leader*, 11 Jan. 1997.
- 21 Abbott, *British Casualties*, p. 76.
- 22 *Cork Examiner*, 12 May 1920.
- 23 *Cork Examiner*, 12 May 1920.
- 24 *Cork Examiner*, 12 May 1920.
- 25 *Cork Examiner*, 12 May 1920.
- 26 BMH WS No. 1310: James Moloney.
- 27 BMH WS No. 560: James O'Mahony.
- 28 BMH WS No. 1310: James Moloney.
- 29 BMH WS No. 1306: Denis O'Brien.
- 30 BMH WS No. 1254: Michael Coleman.
- 31 BMH WS No. 1250: John O'Driscoll.
- 32 *Irish Independent*, 12 May 1920.
- 33 *Cork Examiner*, 12 May 1920.
- 34 HO 904/184/149/150. *Summaries of Outrages*.
- 35 CO 904/112: *County Inspector's Report May 1920* in PRO CO 904/105/-117: *RIC Inspector General and County Inspectors' Confidential Monthly Reports*. Boole Library, University College Cork, Cork.
- 36 Abbott, *British Casualties*, p. 47.
- 37 CO 904/112: *County Inspector's Report June 1920*.
- 38 BMH WS No. 1560: William Foley.
- 39 *Irish Examiner*, 10 June 1920.
- 40 Kingston, *Beleaguered*, p. 191.
- 41 *Southern Star*, 7 Aug. 1920.
- 42 BMH WS No. 1306: Denis O'Brien.