



# A BAD WEEK FOR POLICEMEN IN IRELAND

Easter Week 1916 was a disastrous period for policemen in Ireland, according to retired Garda Chief Supt Donal O'Sullivan. During this year's commemoration ceremonies, he says that very few tributes are likely to be paid to members of both the Dublin Metropolitan Police and the Royal Irish Constabulary who lost their lives whilst trying to keep the peace in Ireland during that week.

## DMP CASUALTIES

The Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) was an unarmed police force, and three of its members lost their lives through violence during Easter Week 1916.

\***Constable James O'Brien (168B)** a native of Kilfergus, Glin, Co. Limerick, was shot through the head in cold blood at the gateway to Dublin Castle in the first hours of the uprising on Easter Monday. He was on duty at the main Castle Gate and when he attempted to close the gates at the approach of the insurgents he was shot through the head. He was a Catholic. He was interred in his family burial plot at Kilfergus, Glin, Co. Limerick.

\***Constable Michael Lahiff (125D)** was on duty at the Grafton Street gateway to St Stephen's Green also on Easter Monday and when he remonstrated with a group of insurgents entering the Green, with the intention of taking it over, he was shot dead. It is alleged that he was shot personally by Countess Markievicz who would later rejoice at her 'achievement'. Constable Lahiff was a native of Kilmurray, Co. Clare. He was 43 years of age and was a Catholic. He was interred in the DMP burial plot in Glasnevin.

\* **Constable William Frith (174C)** was a native of Clara, Co. Offaly. He was 37 years of age and was a Protestant. He had 17





It is alleged that Constable Michael Lahiff was shot personally by Countess Markievicz who would later rejoice at her 'achievement'.

years' service in the Force. While in his bedroom at Store Street DMP Station on 27 April he was fatally shot by a bullet, which came through the window. It was never firmly established as to whether the bullet was fired by an insurgent or by a member of the British Army. He was interred at Mount Jerome Cemetery.

RIC CASUALTIES

**\*Constable Charles McGee**

The first RIC victim of Easter Week 1916 was Constable Charles McGee who was stationed at Gilbertstown, Co. Louth. On Monday 24 April 1916 he cycled to Castlebellingham on duty in full uniform and upon his arrival he found that the Dundalk Battalion of the Irish Volunteers had taken over the village. They had 'arrested' other RIC men stationed in the village along with a Lieutenant Dunville who happened to be driving through the village on his way to the Races.

Constable McGee, along with the other 'arrested' RIC men and Lt Dunville were lined up by the Volunteers alongside a railing at the Dundalk end of the village. As the Volunteers left in the cars, in which they were travelling, they discharged a number of shots in the direction of the RIC men. Constable McGee was shot dead while Lt Dunville was badly injured by a bullet, which passed through his lung, but he survived his injuries.

One of the Volunteer leaders – Sean McEntee – later served as a Minister in a number of Irish Governments. He along with two men – Frank Martin and a Denis Leahy – were charged before a court-martial with the murder of Constable McGee.

All three were sentenced to death but the sentences were later commuted to penal servitude for life for Sean McEntee and penal servitude for 10 years for Frank Martin and Denis Leahy.

Constable Charles McGee (Warrant No. 66908) came from Innishbofin Island, Co. Donegal. He was 24 years of age and single. He was a Catholic and had four years' service in the

Force. He was interred in his family burial place at Gortahork cemetery in Co. Donegal.

**\*Constable Christopher Millar**

When the 1916 Rebellion took place, a small contingent of RIC men was undergoing a course in instruction for potential military officers at Portobello Barracks in Dublin.

A detachment of soldiers from the barracks was directed on Wednesday 26 April to go to the South Dublin Union building, which had been held for some days by Irish Volunteers with a view to dislodging the rebels. A number of the RIC men on the course immediately volunteered to go in support with the military party. The RIC men were not wearing their uniforms.

The doors of the building were locked and secured and the RIC men helped the military in breaking down the doors. A vicious gun battle ensued inside the Union building during which the RIC men distinguished themselves with their exceptional bravery. One of the RIC men was Constable Christopher Miller, who was permanently stationed in Belfast. He was fatally shot



At the time of his death County Inspector Alexander Gray (nicknamed 'Baby Gray' because of his boyish appearance), was in charge of Co. Meath RIC.



and other members were wounded.

Constable Miller's registered number was 63620. He was 30 years of age and he was a Protestant. He had served in Armagh and Kerry and in Belfast. He was single. He was interred in the cemetery attached to St John's Hospital at Kilmainham.

It was an ironic twist of fate that Constable Miller is alleged to have been shot by Comdt Eamon Ceannt – the officer in charge of the Volunteers in the South Dublin Union - as he [Ceannt] was reared in an RIC barracks at Ballymoe, Co. Galway where his father was the head constable. Comdt Ceannt was later executed for his part as one of the leaders of the Rising.

#### **\*Sgt Thomas Rourke and Constable John Hurley**

Friday 28 April 1916 was a black day for the RIC in Co. Tipperary. On the previous evening, Michael O'Callaghan, a creamery manager aged 32 years, employed at Lattin village outside Tipperary town called to see his father at Henry Street, Tipperary.

He was well known to be involved in Irish Volunteer affairs and for this reason he was accosted by a group of people who did not favour his activities. He fired his revolver in the air and the RIC was called to deal with the situation. He refused to admit the RIC to his father's home and fired a number of shots through the doorway – one of which hit a young boy and injured his leg.

A search commenced early the next morning for O'Callaghan and as a result of information received, Sgt Thomas Rourke (Warrant No. 56214) and Constable John Hurley (Warrant No. 67150) of Lisservanane Station in the Glen of Aherlow went to the farmhouse of Peter Hennessy at Moanrour, who was related to O'Callaghan.

O'Callaghan was seated by the fire in Hennessy's kitchen. When Sergeant Rourke asked him his name he just jumped up and pulled a revolver from his trousers pocket. He shot Sgt Rourke in the stomach.

Constable Hurley ran out into the farmyard but before he had time to draw his revolver O'Callaghan followed him and shot him in the back and then shot him twice in the head before he [O'Callaghan] ran from the yard. O'Callaghan made good his escape and despite several searches by the RIC he made his way to America later.

Sgt Rourke lingered in agony for a few days and before his death he made a 'Dying Declaration' giving all the facts of the case. He was a native of Cork City. He had 22 years' service in the Force and had served for periods in Cork and Kerry and in the Depot Reserve Force before transferring to Lisservanane as a Sergeant. He was highly regarded and respected by all who knew him. He was a Protestant and was interred in the grounds of the Church of Ireland church in the Glen of Aherlow with full military honours. He was a married man with no family.

Constable Hurley, who died instantly in Hennessy's farmyard, hailed from Castletownbere, Co. Cork. He was 24 years of age and had three years' service in the Force. He was a single man and was interred in his family's burial plot at Castletownbere.

#### **\*Constable Patrick Whelan**

In the early hours of Wednesday morning April 26 1916, a party of about 15 RIC members under the control of County Inspector George B. Heard travelled in a number of motorcars from Eglinton Street Station and they were accompanied by a number of soldiers from the barracks in Galway. They were 'en

route' to investigate some suspicious activities reported from the Cairnmore area.

As the convoy of vehicles approached Cairnmore Cross it ran into a detachment of sixty or seventy armed Irish Volunteers - some of whom were on the roadway while others were inside the roadside fences. The RIC/army party halted their cars and shooting started immediately. In the course of the shooting Constable Patrick Whelan was fatally injured and died a short time later from his wounds. County Inspector Heard was also injured by gunshot wounds but recovered later.

Constable Patrick Whelan (Warrant No. 63409) was a native of Co. Kilkenny. He was thirty-four years of age and had eight years' service in the Force. He was a Catholic and was buried in Bohermore Cemetery in Co. Galway. He was an exceptionally well-known and popular member of the RIC in Galway city and his funeral was one of the biggest ever seen in that city. He was buried with full military honours.

#### **\*County Inspector Alexander Gray; District Inspector Harry Smyth and six RIC men**

On Wednesday 26 April of Easter Week the Fingal Volunteers [North County Dublin] set out to create diversionary activity – distinct from what was taking place in Dublin city. They were under the leadership of Commandant Thomas Ashe, a Kerry-born schoolteacher from Lispole, Co. Kerry. The second in command was Lt Richard Mulcahy who later became Commander-in-Chief of the Free State Army and later served as a Minister in the Irish Government.

Between 50 and 60 Volunteers in the party attacked the RIC



District Inspector Harry Smyth was killed at the Battle of Ashbourne on 29 April 1916. (Pic courtesy of Garda Museum and Archives.)

stations at Swords and Donabate. No shooting took place at Swords but at Donabate the RIC party returned fire before they were forced to surrender. The few constables in each station were disarmed and their firearms were taken by the attackers.

On Thursday April 27 the Volunteers raided the unoccupied barracks at Garristown but there was no personnel or firearms in that building.

Following the latter raid the Volunteers camped at Baldwinstown Bridge but in the early hours of the morning of Friday 28 April they moved camp to Boranstown, which was only about a mile from Ashbourne RIC Station.

Ashbourne RIC Station was located on the main Slane/Dublin road and about a half-mile north of Ashbourne village. It was a substantial slated two-storey building with four windows facing the front on the top floor. The ground floor had a front door and three windows.

The sergeant, his wife and family resided in a portion of the building. A hedge separated the front of the barracks from the main road. Sgt J. Tuohy and his normal station party consisted of four constables.

On learning about the activities of the Volunteers during Thursday 27 April word was sent to District HQ at Dunshaughlin and District Inspector McCormack, with two sergeants and five constables, went to Ashbourne to augment the RIC party in the early hours of the morning and remained in the station. The next day at about 11am [Friday 28 April] the Volunteers took up positions behind high ditches on either side of the road and commenced sniping at the barracks resulting in all the windows being smashed.

After some time the Volunteers demanded that the station party surrender but DI McCormack refused and told them that they would never surrender. Two bombs were thrown at the station but they exploded harmlessly in the open space in front of the station.

At about 12.30pm the attack on the station eased off when all of a sudden a high concentration of rifle fire was heard a few hundred yards on the road leading to Slane.

#### RIC REINFORCEMENTS

On receipt of the report relating to the Volunteer attacks on the stations on the days previous, County Inspector Alexander Grey arranged for police reinforcements to proceed to Ashbourne to support the local RIC contingent. The County Inspector himself took command of the assembled policemen who had come from different stations in the area.

Next in command was District Inspector Harry Smyth of Navan. The total party numbered about 50, including sergeants and constables. They augmented the few motorcars available to them with other vehicles acquired from local businessmen including a motorcar belonging to the Marquis of Slane. All the vehicles with the policemen on board set out in convoy for Ashbourne.

A rumour persists that as the convoy drew close to Ashbourne a man along the road told them that there were armed men on the road near Ashbourne but his observation was obviously ignored.

The police party continued on and drove right in to the spot at Hammondstown town land where there were several armed volunteers inside the roadside hedges and even on the road itself. The entire RIC party was caught in a trap.



Head Constable William Rowe was the last RIC victim of Easter Week 1916.

The volunteers opened concentrated fire on the motorcars conveying the RIC men as soon as they came into view. The convoy halted immediately. When two of the occupants in the first car got out on the roadway one of them – Sergeant John Shanagher – was shot dead and fell into a dyke on the roadside.

The other man – CI Gray – was shot in the arm and injured. All of the policemen got out of their cars and tried to get shelter in any place that they could, but the situation was impossible as the Volunteers occupied any cover afforded by the roadside fences. A few RIC men took up positions behind and under their vehicles.

Several RIC men were badly injured by the initial fusillade of shots from the Volunteers and some of the fatalities did occur at this time. The RIC men were totally exposed. The Volunteers called on the RIC to surrender but CI Gray refused to do so and instead urged his men to keep returning the fire.

#### HANDOVER OF WEAPONS

A short time later CI Gray was again hit by sniper fire and injured in his arm and body. DI Smyth was wounded a few times but in trying to rally his men he led a group of sergeants and constables to a more advantageous position closer to the Volunteer positions. As he did so, he was shot through the head and killed instantly [he had been injured twice just before that.]

At least two of the civilian drivers who had driven the RIC – one of whom was the chauffeur to the Marquis of Slane – were killed. A motorcar conveying tourists drove into the battle scene and two of its occupants were shot dead. A third man in that car made a safe getaway.

The gun battle lasted for at least four hours by which time the RIC had expended all their ammunition. A Head Constable who was then the senior man in charge surrendered to Comdt Ashe and the RIC handed up their weapons. The entire scene resembled a battlefield when the shooting ceased. There were one or two dead volunteers and several seriously injured. There were several seriously injured policemen – many of them screaming with pain from their injuries.



Lying dead on the roadway were Sgt Shanagher and Constables Hickey, McHale and Gormley. Sgt Young was found lying dead behind a nearby house. The body of DI Smyth lay inside a roadway fence, while Constable James Clery died a short while later from his wounds.

CI Gray was very seriously injured and he was attended to at the scene by Dr Hayes of Lusk who apparently was acting as medical officer to the Volunteers. Dr Hayes arranged to have the County Inspector taken by car to Navan Hospital but CI Gray succumbed to his injuries some days later.

To the eternal credit of Dr Hayes he also rendered medical assistance to the worst injured of the RIC men. The body of DI Smyth was taken to his home at Navan by a constable in one of the few undamaged motorcars.

The bodies of the dead sergeants and constables were kept in the Asbourne RIC Station overnight before their removal on the following day to Navan for Inquests.

During all the time that the bitter battle was taking place between CI Gray's party and the main body of the volunteers, DI McCormack and his party remained confined in the station. Also confined in the station during all this time were Sergeant Tuohy and his wife and children

#### HOPELESS SITUATION

When the battle along the road ceased, a constable went to the station and informed DI McCormack that the party under CI Gray had surrendered and that there was a big number of RIC casualties.

On hearing this, DI McCormack realised that they were in a hopeless and helpless situation against superior numbers. He approached Comdt Ashe and surrendered and the arms and ammunition of the party who accompanied him.

Sgt Tuohy was permitted by the Volunteers to return to the station to his wife and children who had experienced a most traumatic long day while the station came under fire and bomb attack.

Following the surrender of all RIC men their arms were taken possession of by Commandant Ashe and the Volunteers. Their personal belongings were not taken. It was acknowledged that Ashe and his officers did show humanity to the wounded RIC men –giving medical preference to CI Gray –and permitted one of the motorcars to be used to take the body of DI Smyth to his home.

The location of the battle was about 200 yards from the RIC station and when it was all over the location had the appearance



British Soldiers check vehicles on Dublin's Southside.

of a battle site with pools of blood, brain matter and makeshift bandages.

#### RIC FATALITIES

**\*County Inspector Alexander Gray** was a native of Belfast where his father was a Presbyterian Church Minister. He joined the RIC as a Cadet and he had 34 years' service in the Force. At the time of his death he was stationed at Navan and was in charge of Co. Meath RIC.

He served as a District Inspector in Kerry, Armagh, Donegal, Roscommon and Kildare. He was married but widowed at a young age. [Readers of a certain age who studied 'Peig' will recall her account of 'Baby Gray' when he was a DI in Dingle and who then took a very active role on the side of the 'gentry' during the Land Wars of the 1880s in that area.] He was nicknamed 'Baby' because of his boyish appearance.

He succumbed to his injuries at Navan Hospital on 10 May after every effort was made to save his life. After a Church service in Navan he was interred at Esker Cemetery at Lucan with his beloved late wife. His funeral was attended by Mr Chamberlain, the Inspector General of the RIC and a large number of RIC personnel.

Extensive tributes were paid to the memory of a fine police officer in several newspapers and in the RIC magazine of July 1916. CI Gray was the only County Inspector killed during the 1916-22 period.

**\*District Inspector Harry Smyth** was a native of Hertfordshire in the UK and was a member of the Church of Ireland. He joined the RIC as a Cadet and his service number was 59040. He served as a District Inspector in Co. Offaly and at Naas before his appointment to Navan in 1915. His wife was from Co. Leitrim and they had four young children when he was killed.

He died instantly from a bullet to his head as he was leading those under his command to a more favourable location to

engage the Volunteers. His bravery was outstanding. After a Church of Ireland service in Navan he was interred at Ardbracon Cemetery in Co. Meath.

**\*Sergeant John Shanagher** joined the RIC in 1891 and his service number was 54677. He was a native of Co. Roscommon. He was a Catholic and unmarried. He was 58 years of age. He was stationed at Navan station and prior to that he had served in Co. Sligo and in the Depot Reserve. He was with CI Grey in the first car of the RIC convoy and was killed instantly on leaving the car. His remains were removed to Strokestown for his funeral service and he was interred in the family burial plot at Killina cemetery.

**\*Sergeant John Young** was stationed at Killyon RIC Station and was a native of Co. Cavan. His service number was 58036. In his early career he served in Armagh and Down. He had been promoted Sergeant in 1913 and was married. He was a Catholic. He was interred in St Mary's Cemetery in Navan in the same grave plot as Constables McHale, Gormley and Hickey.

**\*Constable James Cleary** was stationed at Moynalty, Co. Meath and he was a native of Co. Galway. His service number was 64900. He joined the RIC in 1909 and was single. He was interred in his family plot at Tuam, Co. Galway.

**\*Constable Richard McHale** was stationed at Crossakiel and his warrant number was 67072. He came from Co. Galway and was only 22 years of age. He had three years' service in the Force and was single. He was a Catholic. He was interred in the New Cemetery at Navan in the same grave plot as Sgt Young and Constables Gormley and Hickey.

**\*Constable James Gormley** was a native of Co. Sligo and was aged 25 years. His warrant number was 66800. He was stationed at Longwood, Co. Meath. He was a Catholic and single. He had four years' service in the Force. He was interred with his colleagues in the New Cemetery at Navan.



Chief Supt Patrick Doyle (seated centre) pictured with the Mount St Group (Pic courtesy if Garda Museum & Archives).

**\*Constable James Hickey** was stationed at Kells, Co. Meath. He was a native of Co. Kilkenny. He was 60 years of age and was a Catholic. He had served as a Sergeant during part of his service. His service number was 54582. He was interred with his colleagues in the New Cemetery at Navan.

#### BATTLE OF ASHBOURNE

Apart from the fatalities arising from Ashbourne, 14 other members of the RIC sustained injuries of varying degree – some were very serious and required long hospitalisation.

The Battle of Ashbourne resulted in one of the greatest losses of life by the RIC in any one incident. However, apart from a lot of local publicity, which the tragedy received at the time in Co. Meath, it never got the national publicity that it deserved. This was due to the total domination by the media of the events in Dublin during Easter Week 1916.

Two civilians fatally shot during the gunfight – John J Carroll and John Hogan – were on holidays from England. They were unlucky enough to drive right into the ambush situation but their driver managed to escape. Both were interred in Deansgrange Cemetery.

The civilian chauffeur employed by the Marquis Conyngham of Slane, who was driving one of the cars conveying RIC members from Slane, was shot and fatally injured and died a few days later from his wounds.

One Volunteer named Crennigan was shot dead during the ambush while another named Rafferty died the next day from bullet wounds received. A number of Volunteers were injured. Comdt Thomas Ashe and Richard Mulcahy did not enjoy the triumph of Ashbourne for very long. At the end of Easter Week they surrendered to the British authorities following the surrender of Padraig Pearse.

They were both convicted before a military tribunal and were sentenced to death. These sentences were later commuted to life imprisonment but they were both released from prison during the General release of prisoners in December 1916.

#### RALLYING POINT

Thomas Ashe was committed to Mountjoy Prison in 1917 for making seditious speeches. He went on hunger-strike and was removed to the Mater Hospital for treatment. While being force fed there he choked and died. His funeral – like that of O'Donovan Rossa's two years previously – was used as a rallying point for Volunteers all over the country. He was interred in Glasnevin Cemetery.

Richard Mulcahy went on to take an active part in the fight for Irish Independence from 1918 to 1922 and was elected to Dáil Eireann. He took the Pro-Treaty side and, following the death of General Michael Collins, he became Commander-in-Chief of the Irish National Army. He was a very dominant force in the new Free State Government.

On Easter Sunday 1959, President Sean T. O'Kelly unveiled a memorial adjacent to where the Battle of Ashbourne took place. It is a very impressive memorial, the design of which was evidently prompted by a poem written by Thomas Ashe.

Entitled 'Let me carry your cross for Ireland, Lord', it commemorates the Volunteers who lost their lives



Front page of Sunday Independent on Easter Sunday 1916.

nearby but like so many other such memorials, there is no mention of the 'Other Irishmen' who also lost their lives on the same occasion.

#### CORK STAND-OFF

In the early hours of 2 May 1916 a party of RIC men, under the command of Head Constable William Rowe of Fermoy, went to the farmhouse of the Kent family at Bawnard, Castlelyons, Co. Cork.

The Kent brothers were well known to be very active Volunteers. The purpose of the RIC visit was to seize firearms which were known to be in their possession and to arrest any one of the brothers who may be in breach of the law. The Kent brothers lived in a substantial two-storey farmhouse with their aged mother.

The ten members of the RIC surrounded the Kent farmhouse after being conveyed there in military vehicles. HC Rowe and a Sergeant went to the front door of the farmhouse and demanded admittance.

They immediately got a defiant reply from inside the house and shots were fired at the police from upstairs windows. A vicious gun battle ensued between the RIC and the Kent brothers who remained in their house and kept firing for some hours after daylight. At an early stage, HC Rowe was shot dead. When this happened the RIC sent for military support to Fermoy military barracks.

Thomas and William Kent were taken to the military barracks at Cork where they were court-martialled two days later. Thomas was found guilty and was sentenced to death and this sentence was carried out. William Kent was acquitted. Kent Railway Station in Cork is named in memory of Thomas Kent.

HC Rowe was married and had five children. He was a native of Co. Wexford and his registered number was 52673. At the time of his death, the 49-year-old was stationed at Fermoy and was a member of the Church of Ireland. He was interred with full military honours in the Church of Ireland churchyard at Castlehyde near Fermoy town.

#### CELTIC CROSS MEMORIALS

Memorials – mostly Celtic Crosses – were erected at many of

the graves of the slain policemen. These memorials were erected by relatives of the deceased members with the assistance of subscriptions made to the Irish Police and Constabulary Recognition Fund.

Many of these headstones are in most cases hidden away in corners of graveyards throughout the country. They are in a shabby forlorn state as immediate relatives who would normally have attended to them are long gone to their Eternal Reward. It would be a lovely gesture to have the headstones and graves of these brave men cleaned up and tidied to commemorate the centenary of their deaths in 2016.



Dublin in ruins after The Rising.

All members of the DMP and RIC killed during Easter Week 1916 (with the exception of DI Harry Smyth) were born Irishmen. They all came from decent Irish families and were 'the cream of Irish manhood'.

It is somewhat ironic that six of the policemen who were killed were Protestant. All had chosen the DMP and the RIC as a career and they perceived their work as protecting the people of Ireland and faithfully maintaining law and order in the country. This is what they were doing when murdered in cold blood during Easter Week 1916. It can be truly said that these men gave their lives for their country and that 'That they too died for Ireland'.

*May they Rest in Peace.*

#### About the Author:

Retired Garda Chief Supt Donal O'Sullivan is the author of 'District Inspector John A. Kearney' – the man who was RIC Head Constable in Tralee, Co. Kerry at the time of Sir Roger Casement's arrest on Good Friday of 1916.