Lecture on the History & War of Independence in Sliabh Luachra
By Fr. John J. O Riordán

Opening Welcome by Patricia Herron Ó Siodhacháin
Lecture 3
Teach an Fhile, Carraganes, Ballydesmond, County Cork
Friday October 24, 2014

You are all very welcome here this evening to the third lecture in this series exploring the culture of Sliabh Luachra.

The idea for these talks came originally from Tim Browne and Donal Ó Siodhacháin, a few years ago. A committee of interested people was set up, however, for various reasons the committee did not really get off the ground and the idea was put on hold.

Earlier this year I tried to revive the idea for the talks and discussed it with various people. All were encouraging and enthusiastic. We decided that holding the lectures in a venue that was not a pub, but which was big enough to hold around 30 people, would be ideal. This house sprang to mind, with its large reception rooms and homely atmosphere. I call it The Poet’s House, Teach an Fhile, because it’s the house Donal and I chose, just over two years ago, when he expressed the desire to return to his native Sliabh Luachra to live out his last days.

So far we have had lectures on the Music of Sliabh Luachra, by Paddy Jones; and the Poetry of Sliabh Luachra, by Bertha McCullagh. Those of you who attended either or both of those lectures will know how informative and interesting they were. In fact, although there are a few core people who turn up to all of the lectures, it is noticeable, as it is again tonight, that each lecture topic attracts an audience different from the last one, which I think is an indication of the success of the talks.

We have been very fortunate so far in the standard and quality of what has been presented at these lectures, and I am sure tonight will be no exception. Our guest speaker tonight is John J O’Riordáin – or as he is known locally as ‘John Rareden’ – an author of several books on the history and culture of the area. He hails from Knockavorheen, Kiskeam and is a Redemptorist Missioner, based in Limerick.

On a personal level he was a tremendous source of spiritual support to both Donal and myself during Donal’s illness, and he continues to be someone to turn to in times of need, as several of you have discovered for yourselves, having met him through being friends of Donal.

The title of the lecture this evening is “’Mongst Heather, Furze and Stones”
Reflections on the War of Independence in Sliabh Luachra.
I hope I will be forgiven for taking a minute or two, before John J starts, to set the scene with a couple of poems that Donal wrote about this topic. The first concerns a tale of two captured British soldiers by local volunteers. There was nowhere to detain them during the ongoing hostilities, except in the homes of the volunteers and their supporters. As time went by they became an accepted part of the community. But the British authorities were searching for them, and any one holding them would have been shot. As the dragnet closed in, some thought that they would have to be executed to preserve the identities of the volunteers they now knew. Others objected to this idea, believing that they could be trusted not to inform. In the end they were executed. The poem is called *Guests of the Nation*, following a short story recalling the same event by Frank O’Connor. Donal dedicated this poem to John J’s father, Jim Riordan.

*Guests of the Nation*
(for the late Jim Riordan, volunteer, patriot and one of the company strong)

Your laughter on crossroads,  
Your sweat on our fields,  
Your touch on our women,  
And the wonder of it all —  
You were British.

Old men gave you their prayers,  
As they once had their hand,  
Seeing your quenched life in sons  
Coming home from the land —  
And you were British.

Old women gave you their tears,  
And in their own secret ways  
Rolled back the long years  
For the tears of their daughters —  
And you were British.

The scar of trench war  
You gave up with your guns,  
No fighting new Huns,  
Back to your countryman’s ways —  
And you were British.

When the cordon closed ’round,  
We could not hold the ground,  
Pitchfork or gun, to us all the one,  
You had no camouflage to run —  
And you were British.

In your final moment,  
Did it help you to know  
A company strong volunteered  
To fight there with you —  
And you were British.
Times I hear of you still
On the odd lonely hill,
You, the one lasting regret
Of some veteran old fighter —
And you were British.

Perhaps some day I will stand
In a land that is free, saying
At a stone to your memory,
That all war is a curse without glory,
And how you died for Ireland
Because you were British.

Donal Ó Siodhacháin

The second poem of Donal’s I would like to read is called Johnny Jones

Johnny Jones
(For Margaret and Sheila)

‘He looked so young and innocent,’
My grandmother Ellie Jackie said,
‘Hard to think him a fighting man,
Giving them soldiers lead for lead.’
Hard to think of Ballydesmond burning,
Or The Boys on the Rock behind Kiskeam
On guard, their rifles pointing westward
For the marauding Tans that never came.
The Bog Road, Clounbannin Cross,
Rain-lashed Tureengarbh Glen,
English troops, King’s generals,
Falling to Sliabh Luachra men.
Shopkeepers, workers, carpenters,
Farming lads of land and plough,
History makers and history shapers —
Most of that rearguard gone now.
Sean Moylan, Guiney, Jim Riordan
Johnny Jones, Jer Richey, Dunlea,
And the others, heroes without exception,
Their likes we will not again see.

Donal Ó Siodhacháin

So I’ll hand you over now to Jim Riordan’s son, a living link to those who fought for their country. After the lecture we’ll have some tea and refreshments and then maybe some music or poetry, we’ll see how it goes.

“’Mongst Heather Furze and Stones.”
Reflections on the War of Independence in Sliabh Luachra
John J Ó Riordáin, CSSR

Introduction
Thank you very much. Well, good evening to you all. Well, as you said, I’m Jim Johnny Riordan’s son alright, from Knockavoreen, just a couple of miles away.

Now, I had a minor strike just four or five years ago, and I’ve gone downhill a bit, and I normally stand up when I’m talking or preaching, but I’m going to stay sitting down with your permission today, so thank you. I have to follow the text as well. I’ve prepared the lecture but I have to keep an eye on it, because the old memory can slip too at times. Anyway, having said that, that’s not any excuse, it’s just a kind of a comment before we get going.

So, it’s a great honour for me to be here in my native Sliabh Luachra paying homage to the ancestors and neighbours who never gave up on the dream of freedom, which at times must have seemed farfetched and unrealistic. Yet, in their poverty and wretchedness, in their rags and nakedness, they told stories of beautiful princes and princesses, of feasting, and pots of gold in tales of great colour and imagination. Without shoes or musical instruments they danced; they sang songs of hope, and romance, and help from over the waves. I’m thinking of Ó Rathaille and Eoghan Rua, and Edward Walsh and Tom Billy and all the voices of named and nameless people that blend into the making of a rich tradition, such as we inherit here in Sliabh Luachra.

So now, the first paragraph has yielded about ten new members, so that looks pretty good. By the time we get in to the lecture there won’t be standing room!

One may ask what inspired the fighting men and women around Sliabh Luachra. I think that subconsciously they were hearing the cry of the ages. They were now the front-line generation, carrying in their bones the hopes and the dreams and anguish of people, from Aoghán Ó Rathaille to the Knocknaboul Evictions, and they were not going to flinch in the face of the challenge that lay ahead of them.

**Background**

The famine of 1821-22 drove six or seven thousand men to assemble along the upper Blackwater valley from Cullen to Ballydesmond. These amorphous bands of famished and destitute men threatened the entire demolition of Millstreet, Killarney and a number of other towns round about. They were described by officialdom as marauders, bent on destruction and mayhem. In reality they were gentle people, driven mad by hunger and crying out to be heard.

For a hundred years nobody heard their cry, not until it was heard at Tureengarbh, not until it was heard at Clounbannin, and not until it was heard at Rathcoole and the Bog Road. With names such as these ringing in their ears, officialdom recognised that the Great Famine, the Young Ireland Movement, the Fenian Rising, the Land Agitation, the Moonlighting and the hanging of John Twiss, were but variants of the ever-present cry for justice and freedom.

Turning now to a closer examination of the events leading to independence, we know that the rise of the Fenians did not leave the Upper Blackwater and the Araglen valley unaffected. Because the Fenians were a secret oath-bound
organisation, our knowledge of them is skimpy. In 1867, the year of the Rising, Hannah Mahoney from Knockavoorheen, belonging to the landlord class, was a boarder at the Loreto Convent School in Killarney. And she used to hear her companions, her fellow pupils in the school, talking about how their brothers were involved in the Rising of '67. After the Rising, many people escaped to America, notably my Culloty relatives from Knockavoorheen and Knockeenadallane, and indeed some of them down here beside us in Glencollins Upper. One of them, Murt Jack Culloty whom I knew when I was a youngster, managed to arrive in the land of the free in a barrel marked ‘Bacon’. So they had various ways and means of getting there.

In the 1880s and '90s, Land League meetings were a regular feature of life all over Sliabh Luachra. At the end of Sunday Mass, Fr Sheehan, the parish priest of Kilmeen (that was this whole area here, including Ballydesmond and Knockaclarig and Kiskeam and so forth) would saddle his horse and head for the latest meeting wherever it happened to be, maybe Knocknagree, or Ballydesmond, or Tullylease, or Knockaclarig, or Abbeyfeale or whatever the venue might be. The first Land League meeting in the south of Ireland was at Tullylease in 1880. It drew an estimated 4,000 people. The following year my grandfather, Johnny Riordan, and Young John Casey from the big house at the far end of Kiskeam, went by saddle horse to a similar meeting in Kanturk.

The numbers in Tullylease took the authorities by surprise. In Kanturk the military and police were ready for large numbers, but they weren’t ready for Young John Casey. Riding a grey horse, he manoeuvred his way around at the top of the Poor House Hill (now called Percival Street), until he found a suitable clearance. Then, with a spur to his horse, he charged the military cordon, shouting to the crowd “Will ye follow me?” And they did, right down through Percival Street, right to the very centre of Kanturk, to the Strand, where the meeting was in full swing.

The Volunteers
The new century, the twentieth century, saw the end of the Land War with the Wyndham Land Act of 1903, but it also saw a steady growth in such nationalistic bodies as the Gaelic League, the Gaelic Revival, the IRB (Irish Republican Brotherhood) and the GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association), followed then in 1913 by the founding of The Irish Volunteers. The first body of Volunteers in this side of the country was the Meens-Reallen Branch, just on the north east of Kiskeam, the Lisrobin Company as it was also called; and the concept of an actual military rising became more tuned in to the minds of the people on this side of the country with the establishment of the Meens-Reallen Branch. The Volunteers drilled secretly under the instruction of an ex-policeman named Patrick Fitzgerald, but locally known as Patsy the Peeler.

Paddy Jamesy Dennehy from Meens returned home on leave for his father’s funeral in 1915, and he forgot to go back. He took advantage of the opportunity to desert his post on the British merchant ship, the Coleen Bella. His presence, and that of other men home on holidays from the British Civil Service, was significant for the Lisrobin Company, because these men had come under the influence of Michael Collins, who himself was a civil servant, as you know, working in the British Postal Service. At Easter 1916, the Lisrobin
Company sent representatives to Barley Hill Bridge, over near Newmarket, the trysting place for the North Cork Volunteers under the command of Dave Barry. Here they were to wait for the reception of arms which were to be brought in by the Aud, under Roger Casement. And then you know the story that happened there, how the whole thing was wrecked in terms of the plans, and no arms turned up, and the men in Barley Hill Bridge were told to go home and await further orders.

Revulsion
The revulsion felt by the public after the manner in which the 1916 leaders were treated was reflected in Government defeats in a series of by-elections, the rejection of Conscription through 1917-18, and the General Election of 1918, where they really rejected the government’s position. So, instead of taking their seats in the British House of Commons as elected deputies, they didn’t do what ones had previously done, the newly elected deputies of Sinn Féin established Dáil Éireann. It went on to supplant the British administration system by establishing Sinn Féin Courts, of which we have heard a little recently. Then, accidentally as it were, on the same day in which the First Dáil sat in Dublin, an incident took place at Soloheadbeg on the Tipperary-Limerick border, which is generally considered to have been the launch of the War of Independence.

Local Developments
Meanwhile developments had been taking place around Sliabh Luachra. In 1914, after Séan Moylan qualified as a carpenter in his native Kilmallock, he moved to his grandmother’s place in Newmarket and transferred his Volunteer membership to the local branch. Kiskeam formed its own company of Volunteers in April 1917, and during that summer companies were also formed in Tullylease, Freemount, Meelin, Rockchapel, Taur, Ballydesmond, Knocknagree and Umerabue. And all of those areas together, they would form what would become known as the Newmarket Battalion, under Séan Moylan.

Prior to the organisational effort, a number of local men had already responded to the mobilisation orders for the Easter Rising. On Holy Saturday, 22 April, 1916, Con Tim Murphy, John Daly (Johnny Dalaigh the Tailor, as we called him) and Arthur O’Keeffe, all from Kiskeam village, and Timothy Callaghan from Knockeenourke, assembled in Young John’s screen, a little screen of trees just east of Young John’s house. Already in the Lisrobin Company were Dan Con Tim Murphy (another one of the clan) from Kiskeam, Maurice Riordan, Glounalogha, and Mike Toby Davy Roche of Carraganes, this town land in which we live here – they were all ex-London civil servants and they were the key people in the build up of the resistance preparing for the War of Independence.

Thus far there was no military action taken in the area. Then, in 1918, there were two local incidents of some note. On St Patrick’s Day, a volunteer managed to snatch a rifle from an RIC man in Newmarket. The second incident was more serious and also happened in Newmarket. After Arthur Griffith’s election in East Cavan in June, the celebration in Newmarket was headed by the Kiskeam Brass Band. The band marched around the town and when it
reached the RIC barracks in Newmarket, here the marchers were set upon by the RIC.

In this unprovoked baton charge, the police concentrated on smashing the musical instruments. It transpired that behind the move was District Inspector Johnny McCoy, acting under instructions from Dublin Castle. (Johnny was a Scotsman, by the way.) During the truce in 1921 Johnny McCoy was confronted in a Cork restaurant and presented with an itemised bill for damages to the band’s instruments. He wasn’t released until he paid the last penny.

Thomas Ashe, a native of Lispole on the Dingle peninsula, was a veteran of 1916 and died of ill-treatment in Mountjoy Gaol on 25th of September of the following year. Kiskeam was the first to adopt Thomas Ashe as patron of the band. So Kiskeam Brass Band, right down into my own day, was under the patronage of Thomas Ashe, and we marched under the flag, which went ahead with an image of Thomas Ashe and the slogan, ‘One man dead for Ireland is worth a thousand men’.

**Music, Song & Dance**
Reference to the band raises the issue of music in this whole process of the struggle for independence. Music played no small part in unifying and enlivening the people, whether it be a band on the march, or performing at a Feis or an Aeriocht. During the Land War in the late nineteenth century, almost every village or district had its own band: you had a band in Doon, a band in Cullen, a band in Kiskeam, a band in Knocknagree, probably one here in Ballydesmond, I’m not certain of that. Ballydesmond though, in later years, certainly had a very creditable fife and drum band under John Peter Fitzpatrick, the head teacher of my early days here in Ballydesmond.

Standard tunes played by the bands were traditional and nationalistic. Emotions were aroused as the accompanying words told stories of various victories and defeats, of bravery and heroism. One has only to think of *The Foggy Dew, Who Fears to Speak of Easter Week, A Nation Once Again, Kevin Barry, Lonely Banna Strand, Sweet Kingwilliam’s Town, The Lonely Woods of Upton*.

Songs that entertained the public to the discomfiture of the enemy were not lacking either, for example, the song that recalls the capture of General Lucas, while fishing on the Blackwater, near Fermoy. The kidnapping of such a senior military officer seriously embarrassed the British, not only before the country over there, but before the world as well, because the Empire was at its peak. General Lucas had disappeared and nobody had the remotest idea where he was – well almost nobody. The inner circle in Sliabh Luachra would have known that he was in Glountanefinnane up here, tied to a furrow-stone. But that’s another day’s work. The British media didn’t know that. Anyway, he got on alright while he was with us, God be good to him.

The army in Fermoy was rampaging through the town shouting, “We want our F'n General back! Give us back our F'n General!” The situation called for a
song of course, and one wasn’t long in forthcoming. It runs to the air of The Blarney Roses, and I’m sure some of you know a blast of it anyway.

’Twas over in Rathcormack, near the town of sweet Fermoy
They captured General Lucas and away with him did fly,
They said, “You are our prisoner, and this you’ve got to know,
You can’t do Greenwood’s dirty work where the Blarney Roses grow.”

Chorus
Can anybody tell me where did General Lucas go?
He may be down in Mitchelstown, or over in Mallow,
He’s somewhere in the County Cork, but this I want to know,
Can anybody tell me where did General Lucas go?

“Twas on a Sunday morning out a-fishing he did go,
And when he had his fishing done he was caught by Who You Know!
They said, “You’ll have to come with us, or else down you will go,
For that’s the way we’ll treat you where the Blarney Roses grow.”

“There’s good men down in Galway and the same in County Clare,
But the likes of those young Cork men you won’t find anywhere;
They treated me so kindly, and if they’d only let me go,
I’d promise to stop reprisals where the Blarney Roses grow.”

Now to conclude and finish, I hope it won’t be long
’Till we see old Ireland free again and the RIC men gone,
And when they free our prisoners and tell them they may go
We’ll do the same for Lucas where the Blarney roses grow.

Ballydrochane Ambush
All these events, interesting though they may be, were only preliminaries to the real actions of the War of Independence, but nevertheless they were very important in the build up. And the first action of the War of Independence for the people of this side was the ambush at Ballydrochane, between Newmarket and Kanturk. Now the road has been changed there now, but the actual little piece of the Ballydrochane ambush position is still there. You would have to look for it though. Now that took place on October 11, 1920.

It was also the first experience of real fighting on the part of the Ballydesmond and Kiskeam Companies and though the ambush was a resounding success, it was not a pleasant experience for beginners. They learned first hand that war is never glorious as Seán Kennedy recalled. Seán Kenny was from Tipperary. He was working in Kanturk, I think it was in the drapery business, maybe as an apprentice but I’m not quite sure of that. Anyway Seán wrote some memoirs later, and this is what he says about his experience at Ballydrochane Ambush:

“The driver of the lorry was killed, and was still sitting upright behind the wheel. The whole place was a sorry sight, with bread, milk, and blood being intermingled. It was my first time seeing a dead person who had been shot and my qualms of conscience came back to me threefold. Why had that poor lad, a fellow human being, have to be killed? Was there no other way of obtaining our freedom?

The fact that we were the legitimate army of the elected Government of Ireland carried no weight, and I thought only of the poor dead lad, who had no doubt, a mother to
mourn him, just as I had. I had some sleepless nights over this, and could tell nobody, as I would be laughed at and told that it was war.”

Now to comment on that, I’d say that his comrades, they might not have laughed at all, because they were not trained to kill. The people fighting for the Republic here, they were trying to create a situation where they could govern themselves, but they weren’t just trained to kill. They only wanted the freedom to run their own country as they knew best. Having spoken to many of the veterans of the fight for freedom, they would have told me that the hardest thing that they ever had to face in their lives was to face killing anybody in these ambushes.

The Republic
As the independence struggle intensified, there was an ever-growing shortage of safe havens. It was in that atmosphere that Kiskeam, on the eastern marches of Slieven Luachra, was dubbed ‘The Republic’. During an interview with Seán Healy, in his hotel room at the Wallace Arms in Millstreet (Seán was a gunner in the War of Independence), he said,

“The Kiskeam areas was one of the safest places in the country for the freedom fighters, and was popularly known as ‘The Republic’.”

I then asked Seán to elaborate on the geographical parameters of ‘The Republic’ and to this he replied (some of you will be quite familiar with this),

“The boundaries of ‘The Republic’ were roughly from Lacka to Glashakinleen and from Kiskeam to Glentanefinnane and Meenganine. That place was a Republic during the whole trouble while we were there; and we would never have succeeded but for the people who lived in it. They must have been the best in Ireland. They had a tremendous spirit and I haven’t heard of any place in Ireland which had a spirit comparable to the one around there.”

Now by curious coincidence, a hundred years before Seán Healy’s time, there was a civil engineer, an Englishman, who was assigned over here, to western Duhallow, to survey the countryside, especially The Crown Estate of Pobal O’Keeffe, where we are here in this part of the world now. The Crown Estate of Pobal O’Keeffe was a very poor quality estate, because the land all around here isn’t great, except good grazing at times. But anyway, around the 1820s, after the disturbance of 1821-22, there was a move towards improving this area. The surveyor was named James Weale. He worked with Griffiths, of Griffiths Valuation, and he had been commissioned by the British government to report on conditions in the area where the famine of 1821-22 had led to civil disturbance. Weale was a philosophically minded man; a man too, with a conscience and a sense of justice. From the outset he respected the local people and had an appreciation of the gross injustices they had endured for centuries. He believed that the people were as good as anybody else, and better than most if only they got the proverbial half-a-chance.

James Weale not only believed, but was bold enough to write what he believed. From his reflection and his practical experience of working in the Ballydesmond area, it was his view that Irish, being the community’s first language, led to difficulties at times. Difficulties also arose from the fact that
the community had been deprived and isolated for so long. Now that the people of Pobal O’Keeffe were exposed to outside influences, they were proving themselves quick in the uptake and more advanced, as a class, than their counter-parts in any part of England. Weale’s great compliment to this hard-pressed Catholic community in this area is his statement that they are noted:

“for an observance of their religious and moral duties, for a general kindliness of their disposition, and by a deep implanted affection for their kindred.”

So in stating that, that the citizens of this area here were firm in faith, sound in morals, and kindly in disposition and had good community spirit, he was declaring that they were living out the ideal as expressed by St Luke in The Acts of the Apostles. Marvellous compliment.

And just to add to that, when I was studying in Cluin Mhuire in Galway, in the Seminary, back in the late 1950s, there was a retired Redemptorist missioner named Fr Tom Cassin. Tom was from Kilkenny. He worked in the Philippines, in very rough conditions, in the early 1900s, from 1906 on to 1915 or more. But then, after that, he spent his life working as a parish missioner up and down the country here, like myself.

Fr Tom maintained that the people living along a stretch of mountain, and he expressed it clearly, he said the stretch of mountain countryside that ran from Newmarket west towards the Blackwater and Castleisland and down towards Rathmore, Millstreet and Cullen, that this area was unique – the finest Catholic people in Ireland. So, in the heart of this area, so described by Fr Tom Cassin, is what Séan Healy calls ‘The Republic’. So there were good grounds for everything that was done here, in terms of the solid base, and the people, and the reliability of the people in the difficult circumstances.

Efficiency & Good discipline
The Republican Army was ever making organisational and tactical improvements in their operations during the War of Independence. The most significant of these was the formation of a full-time fighting force known as the Active Service Unit. The Dublin Brigade established the first active service unit in the summer of 1919, and then during the latter half of that year, and into 1920, the IRA established such ‘columns’, as they called them, in each brigade area. These active service units, or flying columns, became very high profile for the remainder of the War of Independence.

Steady nerves
Swiftness of thought, steadiness of nerve and a mischievous sense of humour are characteristic of the men of the column. During the Tureenganb ambush, Séan Moylan ordered Con Finucane, who was up here from Clamper, Marianne Finucane’s uncle, to take a more advantageous position for firing in the ambush. To this command Con replied, “Sure how can I, and I bound to the peace?” (Moylan had bound him to the peace some time previously for being over exuberant in some scene in Ballydesmond or Newmarket.)
Major reprisals ensued after the Tureengarbh ambush. Dan Guiney, who had participated in the ambush, as he was retreating saw some lorries of troops approaching, and he had no place to hide. But he noticed there was a bunch of farm workers inside in a field, filling turnips into a farm cart, and Dan enthusiastically joined them, and the work-force there, until the danger had passed. So, quick thinking on that one.

But the coolness of Seán Healy really takes beating. Seán was very cool-headed and he was an ideal man at his job. He was trained in the British Army as well, earlier on. When the touring cars and Crossly tender were driving into the ambush position in Tureengarbh, Seán Healy was quietly instructing his companions not to fire on the first car. “I had an idea,” Seán told me, “that I’d like to capture it, so I opened up the machinegun on the second.” He was multitasking in battle, anxious to save the touring car for happier times, and at the same time to play his role in the ambush.

In spite of the life and death situation in which he was engaged, Seán still itched to get his hands on the steering wheel of such a car as the touring car. It was the model of the day, a very powerful car and only used by the high military of the British. So the only chance of ever getting your hands on that would be to capture it, and that’s what he was out to do, apart from whatever else happened in the ambush.

He was indeed the same Seán who had driven away from the attack on Mallow barracks, with a steady hand on the steering wheel and in the other hand a revolver, fighting his way through. His cool and calculating temperament made him eminently suitable for his role as brigade engineer and chief of the gun-crew.

Seán Healy was from down around Rathcoole. He made use of the spoils of Tureengarbh when Con Morley got permission from Moylan to attend a wedding in Killarney. For transport, they ‘borrowed’ the touring car without the commander’s express permission, and rumour had it that they drove in style around Killarney and parked the touring car right in front of the cathedral, as if they were going to the mission. On asking Séan if this were true, he said, “Oh God no; we weren’t that mad,” and went on to tell me that the wedding was taking place in a remote spot outside Killarney.

A final example of a cool head and steady nerves is provided from Clounbannin. (I’m just giving you a taste of the kind of characters you were dealing with here.) Commandant Paddy O’Brien from Liscarroll, after the Clounbannin ambush, he deployed the troops first, and now at the end of the ambush he was trying to account for everybody. In his accounting for the various members, he was still missing four, and he couldn’t locate them; what happened to them; where were they; were they killed; were they not; were they stuck somewhere. Because the Clounbannin Ambush, when it ended, they just had to quietly withdraw and there was a lot of destruction done there. The British lost an awful lot of personnel. The numbers we don’t know for sure, maybe thirteen or fourteen killed and many more wounded. But there was a gunner, and machine gun, in an armoured car, and the armoured car had crashed almost immediately the ambush began, but whatever way it
got stuck in the ditch, it was still able to use the gun. So, it was able to rake the whole area with gunfire. So for that reason they weren’t able to collect any arms or ammunition or munitions, or even check personnel or anything like that.

So, here were four men missing anyway. Mattie Murphy from Cullen, he was doing the quick thinking in this instance. It was the evening time, cow time as we call it, so Mattie got a bit of a stick, and invented a lame step, and he went down the fields with the stick, calling in the cows, “How! How! How!” and he kept going, and he wasn’t shot, thank God, and eventually located the four lads and managed to steer them along to safety without any trouble. So again, rescuing there, but the coolness of it all.

But what sustained the full-time column of fighting men was the good will and support, not only of such groups as Cumann na mBan and the Fianna Éireann, but the solid backing of the community at large. This was the crucial thing that they’d all stress, that the community was behind them, which provided food, clothes and a roof over their heads, often at great personal risk and inconvenience.

I remember my father telling me that he was travelling, he used to have to go round the battalion area once a week, checking on their supplies (he was quartermaster), but he was down in Umerabue, down towards Cullen, and he got a puncture on his old bike. And to tell you the world in which all these things were happening, he went into a house and he said he wanted to mend a puncture, and there were two nice ladies there, and obliging to help him in any way they could, and they offered him a needle and thread! So, that was total innocence. How do you mend the tube of a bicycle? Get a needle and thread.

While not denying the effect of Tureengarbh, Clounbannin and Rathcoole on the enemy, the North Cork Flying Column had become a symbol of the entire War of Independence because of an iconic painting by Sean Keating of the Royal Hibernian Academy. This work is entitled An IRA Column and dates from the early winter of 1921.

The Moylan Factor
As a Commander, Séan Moylan valued his fighting force and never lost a man in battle. He was solicitous for their welfare, and in planning military strategies he always ensured that there was a satisfactory escape route for every member. And if things didn’t go according to plan, he knew there was a way out.

Moylan was a pragmatist. He was open to cooperation with other battalions, but did not allow his basic respect for brigade boundary lines to cheat him out of any opportunity to engage the enemy. It was just such an opportunity that came his way here in relation to Tureengarbh. According to the letter of the law, Moylan should not have crossed the Blackwater with his troops, without the permission of the East Kerry Brigade. But an opportunity came, and it was a good opportunity from their point of view, so Moylan decided, “We won’t pass up this one, and we’ll pass the boundary and we’ll go back west”. And so he did. But that kind of capacity, to keep the rules, and respect them, but at
the same time not to be totally hidebound by them; I think if you want further explanation of that now you’d probably get it most, up to date, from Pope Francis, who is dealing with a somewhat similar situation in the Vatican, needing to be able to understand the deeper things, rather than just the letter of the law.

So that’s Moylan in terms of his character, and that kind of opportunity offered itself at Tureengarbh. The spectacular victory at Tureengarbh, soon to be followed by Clounbannin, caused not only the British, but the Volunteer leaders in Dublin as well, to sit up and take note. Because of the significance of the events that were taking place down here, in the War, the focus began to shift from the urban warfare of Dublin, to what was going on down the country. And, as I say, Tureengarbh, and Clounbannin, and the Bog Road, they were very significant in terms of taking the focus on to that, and ultimately leading to the Truce.

**Albert Wood’s Initiative**

Moylan’s leadership, and the spectacular performance of his flying column, impressed a prominent legal expert named Albert Wood, KC, from Cork city. After Moylan’s release from prison for negotiations during the Truce, Albert Wood was very impressed by Moylan and followed his situation, his case and his trial and his release. And in 1921, Wood commissioned a painting of Moylan and the column, and arrangements were put in place for the work. From the dozens of column members (there were dozens of column members, not just the members in the painting), Moylan handpicked seven men, namely, Mick Mike Denny O’Sullivan (Meelin); Johnny Jones (who we heard about at the beginning, from Glencollins, Ballydesmond); Roger Kiely (Cullen); Dan Browne (Meelin); Jim Riordan (Kiskeam); Denny Mullane (Ballybahalla, near Freemount); and Jimmy Cashman (Kiskeam). These men all assembled at my own home in Knockavorheen, Kiskeam, in the late autumn/ early winter of 1921, and from there they set out for Dublin where they took up residence in the Clarence Hotel, in Dublin, as guests of Mr Albert Wood, for the duration of the entire enterprise, the painting.

Now as it happened at that time of the year, December/ late November, the debate on the terms of the Treaty was in progress, and any tedium suffered by sitting for the artist was relieved by frequent visits to the Dáil to hear the pros and cons of the often very heated debate. Michael Collins always greeted the visitors with warmth and welcoming handshakes on these occasions, something long remembered by the men, as a number of them told me; meeting Michael Collins and his warmth in his relationship with them during that time of the painting.

When de Valera, as President of Ireland, took up residence in Áras an Uachtaráin he exhibited An IRA Column, that’s the painting of this flying column, he exhibited that in the foyer of Áras an Uachtaráin. In so doing, he not only honoured the men of the North Cork Flying Column, but even more so, those whom they represented – the named and nameless men and women who risked all they had, including their very lives, for an Irish Republic which they equated with freedom. De Valera’s successor, President Childers, had Keating’s painting removed to a less prominent part of the establishment, on
the grounds, I understand, that he found it too difficult to explain to Protestants from the North. However, during the presidency of Mary McAlesse, An IRA Column was located in another department of the government, and was brought back to Áras an Uachtaráin, where I understand it is restored. What position it’s in there I don’t know, but it’s back in Áras an Uachtaráin anyway.

Men of the South
Just a little bit on these paintings that you’re familiar with. Now the next one, that’s on the wall behind me, is that right, yes, The Men of the South. The painting known as The Men of the South is an offshoot of An IRA Column. In other words, all at the one time these were done. It may be viewed in the Crawford Municipal Gallery, Emmet Place, Cork, and those portrayed in The Men of the South are from left to right (front row): John Jones; Roger Kiely; Dan Browne; (back row): Jim Riordan; and Denny Mullane.

The Republican Court
Now there’s a third painting by Keating, and that’s doing the rounds as well, and that’s called The Republican Court. That was painted in Knockavorheen, in Kiskeam, in 1946. I was there myself. I used to watch Keating at work, and I’d get the bits of coloured chalk that he’d be throwing away, little buts of it; it was a great novelty in those days and after the War. Anyway, I’m sure we were an awful nuisance to him, but that’s how it was. We used to watch him at work there in 1946.

Now that painting is in Collins’ Barracks, in Cork, in the officers’ quarters, and the location for that painting was chosen by my father. I remember the day well, when Sean Keating and Seán Moylan came along while we were cutting hay in what we call the coarse meadows, and anyway along came these two gentlemen. I knew Seán of course, but the stranger then was Keating, as it happened. So my father did a bit of rooting around and he decided on a particular house, the house of Jack Culloty. Jack’s kitchen in Knockavorheen was eminently suitable to the artist’s purpose. Here, Keating found a fine open fireplace with the traditional crane, and bellows, and all the usual array of iron pots, pans, kettles, hangers and all the other accoutrements that were associated with rural life in the early twentieth century. There was also the half-door, there was a settle-bed, and there was a stairs to the loft, together with pictures of the Sacred Heart and the Virgin Mary. So what more do you want to get a rural description of early twentieth century Ireland.

Jack Culloty and his wife, Margaret O’Sullivan (Maggie Cooley), they had no family of their own, but they willed the house and farm to a nephew of Jack’s, Murty Tom Culloty of Glencollins here, Father Tom’s brother. Murty Tom and his sister, later Peggy Feehan, Newmarket, they ran the house and farm there whilst Keating was working away there too, and they had no objection to their house being used for the artist’s purpose, and that went on there for some weeks. I don’t remember the exact length of time, but it went on for some weeks anyway. Keating used to stay in Moylan’s in Newmarket, and my sister Mary Claire, she was working there at the time and she used to look after him in terms of getting his breakfast and that. She said he was a very simple man,
a modest man, the artist, ate very little and, you know, was satisfied with anything really.

Keating, of course, himself was on his uppers at the time, you know, broke, like a lot of people and, you know. During the War there was nobody looking for having commissions or work done, artistic work and so forth, so he was mighty glad of having the chance of doing this particular painting that he was doing in Knockavorheen.

Keating's Real Life Models

Now in that painting, for those of you who might have an interest in it, the real live models, they used to be brought by horse and cart, or pony and cart from various places. There was a real kind of carnival time in Knockavorheen if you like, at the time, these people being brought along, but you had Tady Moynihan, from Meens; Mike Tadh Cronin, from Dromscarra; Michael (Mockie) Cronin, Knockeenacurri; Jim Riordan, from Knockavorheen; Timmy Cronin (Thade Mockie as we call him), from Kiskeam. Then the sentries in that painting are Paddy and Seán Culloty, they were nephews of Jack Culloty. Seán is still alive and is just living down the road there, on his own, near his brother Tommy.

Mike Thade Cronin was not a Volunteer during the War of Independence, due to his advancing years. There was no doubt, however, where his heart lay in all of this, and his sympathies. The other four men were in the Volunteer Movement, while some of them were working as well as magistrates in the Sinn Féin Courts, so were in that painting of Keating of 1946.

Living on the Brink

I asked Patricia, here, to have a look over the lecture and she asked me to tell the tale of how I came to be here lecturing this evening. It's a kind of a complex story; it goes back a long way anyway. It's the only reference I have here to the Civil War.

The end of June, 1922, the civil war broke out and most people around this side opposed the Treaty, with Seán Moylan, and the fighting went on. They went up to Limerick and did a bit of skirmishing around there, and Kilmallock and on to Waterford and Wexford. But eventually there was a skirmish in Glenamucklagh, over there towards Newmarket, at Collins' of Glenamucklagh, and the Republican and the Free State forces had a clash there on the 16th of October, 1922.

Now as it happened, the day before, on the 15th of October, the Execution Bill was passed by the Free State government, so that anybody caught with arms or ammunition was liable to execution. Anyway, it was the very next day, the 16th of October, that the skirmish in Glenamucklagh ended up with my father's arrest, and I don't know how much ammunition he had, but he had a revolver in one hand, and he had a machine gun in the other, and he was transferred to Limerick Gaol. And when they took him in there they welcomed him specially, because they put his name down in red ink, because red ink meant execution. So things weren't looking good for Jim.
When he was there a while, during November and December, he noticed that the gaol was, generally, vastly overcrowded, very badly run and generally chaotic. So, he saw room for manoeuvre within that situation. One of the things he did, he noticed that, from time to time, the Free State authorities would pick out people who had no charge against them, and transfer them then to another prison. So, anyway, Jim had a next door neighbour who was in, another Riordan, Dan Riordan. Dan was picked up at home in bed and there was no charge against Dan. So, anyway, Jim said to Dan, would you mind switching names, knowing that Dan was already engaged in making a tunnel out under the gaol wall, into the grounds of the mental hospital, just across the bohereen.

So anyway, Dan was happy out to stay there and take on another personality, because all he wished to have was a bit of tobacco, and then he was down in his tunnelling doing his turn there; there were a lot of them involved in it. But, Dan was working away with a fork and a spoon, anyway, and making his way out of Limerick Gaol.

So the next lot to be transported then, the ‘no charge prisoners’, were told line up there, and Jim Riordan lined up with the rest of them and hoped for the best. And then there was a further inspection and questions, and “Who are you?” and “I’m Dan Riordan. I was behind at home in my bed and I was arrested.” So, all that worked alright.

The final inspection, then, was just before they left Limerick Gaol. The two Free State officers came right down the line checking each person as they went along, and just right in front of my father, click, click, heels, one of the officers, and then he says, “Is it there you are, Jim?” He recognised my father. ‘Twas Den Galvin, God be good to him. And my father, “Yeah,” he says, “What kind of a chance have I?” And Den say, “Oh, but a poor chance,” he says, “but I won’t say anything.” So, anyway, they marched on and the troops were transferred to the Curragh. So there was Jim Riordan gone, as far as the Curragh anyway, so that was grand.

Now when they were in the Curragh, it dawned on them in Limerick that this prisoner in red ink was missing, Jim Riordan. So where was he? So they reckoned, anyway, he wasn’t in Limerick, so he must have been somewhere, so they decided they’d search the other gaols. So, the Curragh was the next stop. Where was he? They didn’t know in the Curragh either.

But meanwhile, there was a man from down Banteer side, I won’t give you his name now, it might cheer you up too much; but a man from Banteer side. He said he could identify Jim Riordan and that he would travel up to the Curragh to do so. Which he did, as Eamonn Kelly says. And he arrived up there on a Saturday. And the Free State officer in charge of the prisoners, he had locked up for the weekend, and when your man arrived he said, “Now the place is locked up for the weekend and I can’t allow you in to see him,” even though the fellow was very anxious to get in to identify the prisoner. But he said, “No, you’ll have to wait until Monday morning. And then you’ll come in on Monday morning and we’ll give you access, not only to the prisoners themselves, but
also to all the records, and the prisoners as well, so you can check all out there and identify whoever you want to identify.”

So, in the providence of God anyway, the good man went out for a swim on Sunday evening and got drowned. And all that came from the Free State officer who was liaison with the Sinn Féin or Republican officer, and because the prisoners had their representative, and the other side had their representative. So anyway, this other man, the Free State officer, he said one day to the liaison man, he said, “One of your fellas is a bloody lucky fella,” he says, and then he told him the whole story of what had happened over the weekend. So, because of, as I say, the providence of the Lord, and the opportunity now to say a prayer for them all that was given to me, I’ll say, “May the Lord have mercy on them all, and give them happiness in the Kingdom to come, and the Kingdom that is for them now, and Amen. Sin é bhfuil.”

(Some questions and answers followed.)