

THE BLACK AND TANS IN MOHILL

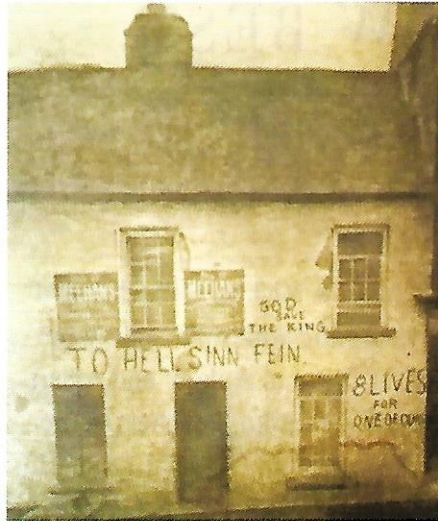
Christopher Meehan

THIS IS THE story behind a photograph which has been in our family for three generations, was missing presumed destroyed as a result of an episode involving burst pipes, but turned up again earlier this year. It shows our old shop premises. On the front wall there are two shop signs bearing the name "Meehan's" but also present are three pieces of graffiti proclaiming: "To Hell Sinn Fein" "8 lives for one of ours" "God save the King". The last occasion this picture appeared in print was back in the late eighties or early nineties when a local curate, Fr Columba McCole, compiled a book, a kind of portrait of Mohill and its people as seen through photographs. In the caption below this particular photo Fr McCole had tactfully added words to the effect that the slogans had been put on the wall by the Black and Tans and not by the Meehan family. For avoidance of doubt, I assume!!

Like with any family history that's being recounted it comes with the health warning that it is likely to be high on anecdote and low on verifiable fact. Nonetheless, different accounts of the same events, between those told to me, on the one hand by relatives and on the other by town's people, broadly tally and corroborate one another.

My grandparents Christopher and Sarah Meehan, he from County Meath, she from the Inishowen peninsula in Donegal, Greencastle to be precise, met while working in Knott's Hotel on Hill Street in Mohill, sometime around the turn of the last century. Within a decade of this they had married and moved up to Main Street, where they opened a shop and set about raising their three children Michael, Maureen and Sean, the last named being my father, who was born in the momentous year of 1916. They kept two cows in a byre out the back, which were brought down from grazing in a field near the convent, to be milked each evening. They made their own ice cream for sale in the shop. Even in my time, I recall seeing in our back yard milk churns and containers for holding ice, which dated from back then. I often heard stories about emigrants to the USA writing home, extolling the delights of the New World and what it had to offer, which included ice cream parlours, only for their unimpressed relatives to remark "Sure, don't Meehan's have one of those?" My grandparents' quiet life of honest toil was about to change dramatically.

According to Cormac O'Suilleabhain's excellent tome "Leitrim's Republican History



■ Meehan's shop in Mohill with defacement by Black and Tans

1900-2000" the Black and Tans arrived in Leitrim in the late Summer or early Autumn of 1920. Their mandate from Lloyd George was to quell the natives and make Ireland: "a hell for rebels". They established a permanent base in Mohill in November 1920. By the Spring of 1921, Leitrim was in a state of siege with most of the south of the county under curfew. The outrages committed by the Black and Tans are well documented in Mr O'Suilleabhain's book and for anyone with an interest in the history of the period I can't recommend it highly enough.

I believe that my grandfather was treasurer of the local branch of Sinn Fein. This appears to be borne out in a story told to me recently by my cousin Mary Roben (nee McIntyre), the daughter of my Aunt Maureen. Apparently, a poor woman who lived in the Causey in Mohill (roughly the area between Hill Street and Station Road) was being evicted from her home for falling behind on her rent, when my grandfather arrived on the scene with the amount of back rent owing and she had to be reinstated. Whether this marked him out for unfavourable attention in certain quarters I can only speculate but raids on the shop by the Tans started to become a regular occurrence. At first, it was relatively low level. Heading home from the pub to the Castle at the bottom of the town where they were billeted, they would bang on the front door and demand that someone come down and serve them cigarettes. After doing this for a while they abandoned all such courtesy, battered down the door with their rifle butts and helped themselves. Things also developed a more sinister aspect. One morning my grandfather awoke to the sound of someone calling him from the street. He, being a large man, was perhaps a trifle slow in getting out of bed. That may have saved his life, as a bullet whistled by him missing his head by inches.

"Tell me Christopher, did you ever hear

about the time your dad kicked the Black and Tan?" I was ten years old and the speaker was Paddy Cox, one of a group of elderly men who every day (except Sundays) manned their posts sitting on the window sill of Cryan's Pub at the corner of Main Street and Glebe Street and whom I used to chat to on my way home from school. I had totally forgotten about the incident he was referring to until my cousin Pat C McIntyre, the eldest son of my Aunt Maureen, mentioned it a few weeks ago. The Tans, during a raid, had planted bullets on top of a dresser in the scullery. Fortuitously, my grandmother who was fetching down a plate discovered them and disposed of them. When a subsequent raid left the Tans disappointed they marched my grandfather out to the yard declaring that they were going to shoot him. At which point my father, all of five years old, went hysterical and started screaming: "Don't shoot my Daddy" and administered a kick to the officer's shins. It would be nice to think that the actions of a plucky five year old touched the hearts of the oppressors who then spared his father's life, although that may not be as far fetched as would first appear. Cormac O'Suilleabhain instances the case of a family whose house was about to be torched by the Tans. All family members bar one, the youngest boy, not much older than my father was, had evacuated the building. He steadfastly refused to leave. In the end, the Tans relented and left the building alone. Whether they ever intended to shoot my grandfather I'm not really sure. I'm more inclined to think that this was just one further example of escalating terror and intimidation by the Black and Tans. So that the message would not be lost on anyone they then proceeded to daub the walls with the slogans that appear in the photo. The incident undoubtedly had a chilling effect on my grandparents and their children. Soon afterwards my grandfather was advised that it was no longer safe for him to remain in Mohill and so he was obliged to go on the run. I don't know exactly how long it was for but

I hope it was short. In any event the truce was declared on the 11th July 1921. I've no doubt that the family reunion was a joyful and emotional one.

I said at the beginning that, after a long period when it was assumed that the last remaining copy of the photograph had been destroyed, in July of this year it turned up and for this I am extremely grateful to Andrew Marshall who discovered it while in the course of doing some work on the house. Andrew lives outside Mohill but is an Englishman who originally hails from near Leeds in Yorkshire. I can just imagine his bemusement on seeing the slogans and wondering who put them there. All I can say is to assure him that they weren't put there by the Meehan family.

TO HELL OR TO CONNAUGHT & THE STRAY SOD

Nicola Kearns

Adjudicator's comments: *An enchanting, mysterious story about the travails affecting a poor farmer when a fairy tree is destroyed by lightning, he loses his wife, then his herd and then most of his land. The author sets the scene really well, arousing our sympathy for the farmer. The note of mystery enters when he encounters one of "the good people" whose influence changes everything, reassuring him they "always put their mistakes to right, eventually." With great skill the author brings the story to its magical yet quite credible conclusion.*

PADDY LIFTED his head. 'She's not looking good,' he said sadly, wiping the blood on the legs of his navy overalls.

The heifer lay on her side, moaning quietly.

'It's the third one this week,' Barney McGovern sighed, shaking his head. 'I'm done for.'

Both men stood looking at the poor animal, helpless. There was no more they could do.

Outside a gale was brewing noisily. A sound of groaning could be heard flowing through the air. Almost like an animal in pain — but the one in front of them had no strength even to do that.

'It's the trees,' Barney explained, when Paddy looked about startled. 'They make that noise when there's a strong wind.'

'Be Gawd, but that would put the hairs standing on your head alright,' Paddy answered, opening the barn door. 'It's as dark as a coal pit out there.'

It was just gone three on a December afternoon, but the sky indeed was almost pitch black, with not a star to be seen. Nor a moon. The leaves crunched under the men's feet as they picked their way along with just the light of Barney's mobile phone to guide their path.

Suddenly the power died.

'Jaysus but that battery never stays on for more than a day,' the tired farmer swore impatiently, pushing the black iPhone into his pocket. He stomped on towards the direction of his house, with Paddy walking behind following his steps.

'It's over the next field, we'll see the light of the house soon,' he shouted to the man behind. There was no answer, but he could hear the noise of the other man's wellies tramping through the sodden field.

The land is pure swamp, Barney thought to himself. 'To hell or to Connaught', Cromwell had said. Well, he wasn't wrong there, and that's a fact. Whatever it was about this county, it sure didn't

make being a farmer easy work. Now this sickness that had come on his cattle was going to ruin him altogether. Just a few years ago he had a thriving creamery, a wife in the house, thirty acres and a herd of cattle that any man would be proud off. Now it was nearly all gone. The love of his life, Roseanne, had been killed helping him lift the wet bales of hay. He had to sell off the land to pay for the two more bad summers that followed. Being left with just two acres of land meant having to take most of his cattle to the mart, for less than half they were worth. It was as though he'd been cursed. This blight on what was left of the stock was the end for him.

He'd spent his whole life on these fields in Leitrim, with the lake behind the house and the Iron Mountains looking protectively over his home-place. Roseanne had blamed their run of bad luck on the lightning that struck the fairy tree, which had stood proudly in the meadow for hundreds of years. Barney had scoffed at her belief in the old folklore, that a lone tree in a field belonged to the little people and anyone who touched it would be cursed. Sure it wasn't like he'd done it on purpose. But if truth be told, hard times had followed that particular storm and losing Roseanne had been the worst curse of all.

To shake his mind off what could within seconds send him into a fit of tears, he shouted back at Paddy, 'This walk seems longer in the dark, that's a fact.' On hearing no reply, he turned his head. The vet was nowhere to be seen. Calling out, Barney felt a coldness in his chest. The air was still. Not a bird, not a star, just the wind howling and the sound of the heavy rain falling through the trees. He called again. Nothing. He kept walking, all the time turning his head around and shouting out every few seconds for his friend.

Something wasn't right. Barney stopped and looked about pointlessly, as there was nothing to be seen but blackness and the trunks of tall trees. He should have made it to the house ages ago. Did he lose his bearings, he wondered? And where the heck was Paddy? A rustling to the left of him caused him to call out, 'Paddy, over here.' But it wasn't his friend who answered. A light could be seen in the distance. A light that seemed to move and come closer to him. The rustling got closer. Barney gasped as a shape stepped out in front of him carrying an old tilly lamp. Was it a man or a woman?

'Who is it?' he asked.

The male voice was soft and low, but not one he recognised. It was an accent however from these parts alright.

'Follow me,' the voice answered, 'You've stood on stray sod.'

Barney stood still. 'Stray sod?' he repeated.

'Yes. If you stand on the stray sod you will lose your bearings.'

The shape walked ahead and Barney gathered himself and sprinted after him.

'You believe in the little people and the old folklore?' he was asked.

Barney found he had to almost run to keep up, yet the man ahead of him appeared to be walking at a snail's pace.

'I do,' he answered. 'I didn't use to, but since the fairy tree in our field was struck by a fork of lightning, I've had nothing only a sight of bad luck since and I put it down to that. There's truth in the stories alright. I know that now.'

'They aren't stories,' was the reply. 'True enough it was none of your own doing. But even the little folk can make mistakes. They always put their mistakes to right though,' he continued, 'Eventually.'

Barney said nothing. Whoever your man is, he decided, he's had more than a few pints before he headed for the road. A lock of half ones as well, I'd guess, he thought.

'You lost your wife?' he was asked.

'Yes,' Barney replied. 'The summer turned bad after that lightning storm and the hay was ruined. The summer after was the same and the one after that. Roseanne was out trying to help me save the hay one of the bad days and...' he faltered, 'and well, she got killed in the helping me. God love her.'

He saw the light of his own house, up ahead.

'There it is,' he shouted out. 'It's the home-place. I feel like I've been walking for days, or years.'

But there was nobody left to shout at. The man had vanished, just as Paddy had earlier.

Exhausted, Barney leaned his hand against the back door, to remove the filthy wellingtons from his feet. To his horror, the door opened and he almost fell through. He gasped with amazement when he saw who had opened it.

'Well you took your time coming back,'

Roseanne scoffed. Behind him he could see Paddy sitting at the kitchen table, forcing a lump of brown bread into his mouth.'

Barney was speechless. His mouth hung open and he blinked several times.

'Will you come in man,' his wife laughed, 'you look like you've seen a ghost.'

Barney stumbled into the warm kitchen. He tried to speak, but no words came out. Instead it was Paddy who spoke.

'Where did you vanish to? I've done the check, all 234 cattle fit and healthy. You'll do well with the milking this year for sure.'

Barney stared. Out the window the sun shone brightly on the lake, whilst the fairy tree stood in full bloom in the meadow next to it.

'The tree.....' he whispered.

'What was that?' his wife asked.

'The fairy tree.....it's...'

'Oh you believe in fairies now do you?' she laughed, handing him a hot mug of tea. 'What changed your mind?'