

# D Y I N G F O R I R E L A N D

Ken Boyle

THE YOUNG GIRL in Belfast opened the family bible and on a blank page wrote an account of the terrible night when her home near Selton Hill in Leitrim was attacked by an IRA unit. It ended when her father, William Latimer, surrendered to the attackers and was taken a short distance from the house and shot dead, labelled as an informer. The Selton Hill engagement of 11 March 1921 was the single largest setback experienced by the Republican movement in Leitrim during the War of Independence. Five IRA volunteers were killed and a sixth, their injured leader Sean Connolly, died later. Only ten IRA volunteers were killed in Leitrim during the independence struggle, the other four were single fatalities. What had gone wrong at Selton Hill?

Sean Connolly was an experienced guerilla operator. He and Sean Mac Eoin led the very effective North Longford Brigade of the IRA. Ernie O'Malley's book, 'Rising Out', tells the story of Connolly. In late 1920 IRA GHQ in Dublin decided on a new role for him. They sent him to Roscommon, and then Leitrim, to use his experience to step up the armed campaign in those counties. By this stage, in response to the arrival of the Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries, the IRA had begun to promote the formation of Flying Columns in the active areas. This prevented the easy capture of volunteers, they no longer lived in their own homes on a regular basis and their training and mobility gave them the element of surprise over opponents. They did however require logistic support in the form of safe houses, food and clothing, etc.

Connolly crossed over from Roscommon into Leitrim in February 1921 and set about training the recently formed South Leitrim Flying Column into a disciplined unit. He decided to divide the still inexperienced column into two sections, with Sean Mitchell, the

South Leitrim Brigadier, leading one and he himself the other. On March 4th, Mitchell's section was the first to engage the enemy when they staged a successful ambush at Sheemore, on a mixed party of British army and RIC returning from a search operation on those attending mass at nearby Gowel Catholic church. Mitchell's men, who had picked their position carefully, opened fire on the returning search party inflicting injuries and causing confusion among both the soldiers and RIC. In the ensuing battle, Lt. Wilson, the young officer in charge of the Bedfordshires, was fatally wounded. Four of his men and two RIC members were also wounded before Mitchell's section made good their escape. The immediate area of the ambush was the scene of reprisals by Crown Forces in the following days. Gowel Temperance Hall and a nearby creamery were set on fire and raids were carried out on the homes of suspected local Republicans.

A week after Sheemore, Connolly led his section of the column, 11 men in total, across country towards Gortvagh townland, about four miles from the town of Mohill which contained an RIC barracks. Sean Mac Eoin had been captured at Mullingar railway station a few days earlier and the Longford men had sent word looking for Connolly to return home to take over control of their Flying Column. He promised them that he would be home within a week, and he was keen for his section of the Leitrim Column to have one last opportunity to engage the enemy, adding practical experience to the training he had given them. After a tiring march they came around Selton Lake heading towards the home of the Flynns, passing the home of the Latimers, a Methodist family living nearby. One of the members of the section was related to the Flynns and knew that his comrades would be made welcome and would be able to rest



Selton Hill Monument

up and be fed. Although he was correct in his assessment, the Flynns pointed out the unsuitability of their house as a stopover as it was located just off, and below, the main Mohill to Ballinamore road. Anyone approaching their house from the main road had a clear field of vision of it and the land behind. Connolly put no guards up on the roadway but put two into the adjacent house of the McCullaghs, Protestant neighbours of the Flynns.

William Latimer's 81 year old mother had passed away that morning and he would have to travel to Mohill to make arrangements for her funeral and obtain provisions for the wake. Before setting out, his son George was sent over to the McCullaghs to borrow items to assist in the wake. Inexplicably, the two guards, who had been charged with keeping the McCullagh family confined indoors, allowed George return home with the news that there were armed men in the McCullagh's house.

When William Latimer later set off for Mohill by horse and cart he had concerns for the safety his family. Even the most ardent sympathisers became anxious when armed volunteers were in their area, as, in the event of discovery, the subsequent reaction by Crown Forces to locals could be both indiscriminate and harsh. As it was, news of the section's presence in the area was already spreading. At Murphy's of Gorvagh, the local shop, it was openly being commented on. The danger of the information falling into the wrong hands was of such concern to Delia Mannion, a Murphy's employee and member of Cumann na mBan, that she had her concerns conveyed back to Connolly.

The subsequent IRA investigation believed that William Latimer met Dr Charles Pentland while making his way to Mohill. Dr Pentland, the dispensary doctor for the area, enquired after Latimer's mother. Pentland was an ex British officer, he had enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) during WWI and had spent a period of time on the western front. He was also medical officer to the RIC and on accepting his temporary commission with the RAMC they had presented him with a revolver as a token of their esteem.

Dr Pentland's cousin, Gilbert Potter, was in the RIC, serving in Cahir, Co Tipperary. After talking with Latimer, Dr Pentland drove on to his dispensary in Gorvagh, where possibly the presence of the IRA unit in the area was also being discussed, but he only stayed a very short period, returning to Mohill before Latimer's arrival. In view of his background and RIC connections Pentland would have felt honour-bound to alert the RIC to the danger in their area, particularly after the fatality and injuries at Sheemore the previous week. The IRA investigation was of the opinion that he personally contacted District Inspector Gore-Hickman of Mohill RIC who arranged an immediate mobilisation of the Bedfordshire Regiment based some distance away. They also believed that William Latimer was contacted by the RIC when he arrived later in Mohill.

Ernie O'Malley considered Connolly's choice of resting place 'strange' with no chance of escape back across their approach route and no way up on to the road in case of trouble. He also questioned why no sentries were posted towards the roadside. These shortcomings were brutally exposed when at around

5 pm two officers and 25 other ranks of the Bedfordshires, guided by D I Gore-Hickman, arrived by car and lorry, bent on revenge for the Sheemore ambush. Just before their arrival Sean Connolly at last appeared to have grasped the danger of his men's position and had sent Charles Flynn up on to the road and he had made signs with his hands indicating an enemy approach.

It was now too late, the British troops appeared well prepared and set about their task immediately. Six men with Lewis guns were placed at the piers of the entrance to the Flynn's while one party of troops headed down the separate laneway to the McCullagh residence. The main party of troops headed towards the Flynn residence. Connolly had taken his men to the rear of the house and ordered his second in command, Bernie Sweeney, to take three or four men and attempt an escape to the north. But it was now too late to formulate an escape plan which should have been in place since their arrival.

The British troops heading down towards McCullagh's took up a position to the rear of the Flynn property with views across the area occupied by Connolly's men. When the firing commenced the retreating volunteers were taking a deadly hail of fire from the Lewis guns on the higher ground added to by the fire coming from their right flank on the McCullagh's laneway and also from the troops approaching the Flynn residence. Outnumbered and outmanoeuvred, facing superior weaponry, they stood no chance, five of them were killed almost immediately and their commander mortally wounded. The two sentries in the

McCullagh residence managed to escape across the countryside to the rear in the chaos. One member of Bernie Sweeney's section also escaped and Sweeney himself, badly injured, managed to conceal himself and evade capture. Another injured volunteer was taken captive. It was a dreadful setback to the emerging Leitrim struggle and a total shock to the community.

Charles Pinkman, a local IRA intelligence officer was tasked with investigating how Connolly's section's position was given away. Pinkman acknowledged that he did not contact William Latimer directly as he did not want to blow his cover and reveal himself as an IRA member. Accordingly, he was not able to say what, if anything, Latimer told Pentland about the IRA column. Pinkman's account stated that Latimer was approached by the RIC in Mohill but that by that stage the mobilisation of the Bedfordshires had already begun. Pinkman does not specifically suggest that Latimer provided the RIC with any information.

The outcome of the investigation was a decision to execute Latimer and Pentland as informers. It appears that this decision was confirmed by IRA HQ in Dublin but the local IRA commander in Gorravagh refused to provide weapons for Latimer's killing. Latimer was very well regarded in the community where his family were well integrated. His children attended the local Catholic national school and he was reputed to have single handedly prevented the eviction of a local Catholic family when their own relatives sought to possess their property at foot of an unpaid loan. The Latimer family is also recorded as having donated to the Irish Volunteers

Dependents Fund in the months after the 1916 Rising.

Charles Pentland lived close to the RIC barracks in Mohill and was provided with armed protection when attending his dispensaries. William Latimer became an easier target when protection he received for a period was withdrawn. A second party of men, drawn from Mitchell's section, were detailed to carry out his execution on the night of 30 March. The men knocked on the door and called on Latimer to come out but he refused.

While it is not clear whether the first shots were fired from within the house or by the attackers, both Pinkman's account and Mrs Latimer's Solicitor's account concur that at least one grenade was thrown into the crowded house and exploded in the living area, fortunately causing no injuries. Both accounts suggest a terrifying attack on a home occupied by a family and some neighbours. When Latimer 'shouted out that he would surrender to save his wife and family' he was ordered to come out with his hands over his head. Before being shot dead he is said to have exclaimed 'Blame Pentland and not me'.

Charles Pentland drove out to the Latimer home to pay his respects. While it may never have been his intention that his intervention would result in anything like the deaths of six IRA members, he knew that his involvement marked him out for at least the fate that befell William Latimer. On his return to Mohill he and his wife quickly packed a few cases and set off immediately with their young child for the safety of Dublin and then England. William Latimer's remains were laid to rest

alongside his mother Anne who had been buried just a few weeks earlier. After his father's death it fell to 15-year-old George Latimer to attend to the registration of his grandmother's death.

Just a few weeks later the type of incident Charles Pentland had tried to prevent at Selton Hill, was to befall his cousin. On 23rd April, D I Gilbert Potter, from Dromahair in Co Leitrim, was driving near Cahir, when he came upon the aftermath of an ambush carried out by a unit of the IRA's South Tipperary Brigade, in which one British soldier had been killed and others wounded. When he was stopped and identified as an RIC officer, the IRA unit took him along as a prisoner on a 40-mile trek across the Comeragh Mountains into Waterford. Their intention was to hold Potter hostage for the life of an IRA volunteer, Thomas Traynor, who was under sentence of execution in Dublin. Traynor was aged 39 and married with ten children. The British refused the exchange, offering instead to allow four other IRA prisoners to escape from custody as if by accident.

During the negotiations Gilbert Potter was allowed write several letters to his wife and also an emotional last will and testament. On the 26th April, the IRA unit received word that Traynor had been hanged. They felt it would show weakness if they did not carry out their threat. Dan Breen, who had taken part in the Soloheadbeg engagement that ushered in the start of the War of Independence, was present at Gilbert Potter's execution the following day. He described his distress at having to carry out such an unpleasant duty and characterised Potter, in his book 'My Fight for Irish Freedom',

as 'a kind and cultured gentleman and a brave officer'.

Before his execution, Potter handed over his diary, signet ring and gold watch with the request that they be conveyed to his wife. The unstamped typed letter, delivered to Liliás Potter with her husband's belongings and will, stated 'D I Potter, having been legally tried and convicted, was sentenced to death, which sentence was duly carried out on Wednesday 27th April'. Shortly afterwards she fled to England with her four children to settle in Tunbridge Wells, Kent.

### Aftermath

On 21st December 1924 Charles Pentland was outside his London residence, 15A, Gower Street with his brother in law, Mr Noel C Hamilton, of Bundoran, Co Donegal. He had established a lucrative career in medicine since fleeing to London three years earlier. Gower Street runs parallel to Tottenham Court Road, they are connected by a number of side streets. As Charles and Noel were awaiting the arrival of friends, who were to take them to play golf, a car came out of the Store Street connection to Tottenham Court Road and collided into a lorry travelling along Gower Street. The collision caused the lorry to swerve up onto the footpath striking Noel Hamilton a glancing blow but Charles Pentland was not so fortunate, he was thrown up against the metal palings fronting his own house and then the rear wheel of the lorry ran over his body before halting. Charles Pentland received such severe injuries that he died almost immediately. While this tragedy was unfolding outside the front door, his wife Ellen was in the hall of the house with their two children.

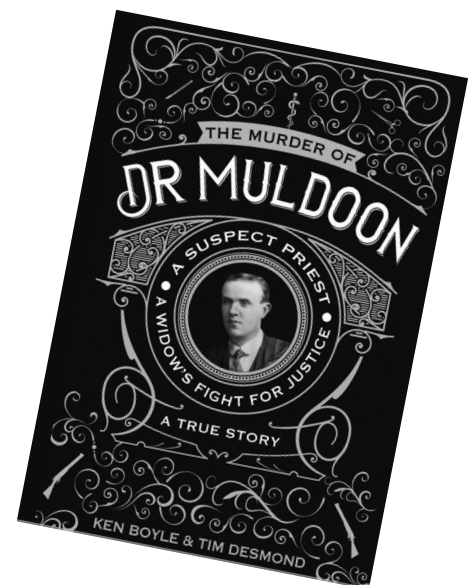
Isabella Latimer and her family lived in dread after the trauma of the attack that resulted in her husband's death. Shortly afterwards the family were spirited away from the area by cousins, hidden below a false bottom of a horse drawn cart, covered with potatoes. Isabella eventually took her young family to live in the perceived safety of Belfast. She and her children received compensation from the courts in Leitrim for the loss of a husband and father, for Isabella's mental suffering and for damage to their house. In the Spring of 1922 Dáil Eireann published a notification confiscating the property and lands of the dead William Latimer and the residence of the Pentlands in Mohill.

The Latimers eventually received limited compensation for the confiscation of their property, Isabella went no further in her claim than stating that her late husband 'was accused of giving information to the R I C'. The fatherless family were brokenhearted but got on with their lives. Besides the account written in the family bible, their home in Tate's Avenue, Belfast had a constant reminder of that awful night. The piano in the front room bore evidence of gunshot or explosive damage. When Isabella died in 1940 her remains were returned to Leitrim to be buried alongside her husband, her children did not feel safe to return to visit their Leitrim cousins and tend to the family burial plot, until the 1970's and 1980's.

In another remarkable twist to the story, Gilbert Potter's oldest son, Gilbert Charles, went on to join the British Navy. In 1938 he was serving on the destroyer, HMS Diana, when he met a fellow sailor by the name of Traynor, who told him that his father was hanged by the British in 1921.

This meeting appears to have encouraged Gilbert to find out more about his own father's death. World War II intervened and it was not until the 1960's that Gilbert finally followed through on his intention. Before travelling down to Tipperary, he met with Dan Breen in a Wicklow nursing home, where the aging Breen recounted his memories of those fateful days in 1921 which resulted in the executions of Thomas Traynor and Gilbert's father.

The War of Independence had claimed many lives, many men volunteered and met their deaths bravely in the independence struggle, others, while not volunteering for their ultimate fate, also met their deaths with great bravery. Time moves on and priorities change, some of the sons of men from both sides of that divide would come together as comrades to fight the fascist threat in a later global war.



*Ken Boyle has a avid interest in history and is the co author of the recent book on The Murder of Dr Muldoon. His grandfather was a cousin of Dr Muldoon. Ken's family come from the Ballinamore area.*