



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

A shooting in Athlone



IAN KENNEALLY
Historian and Author

In previous articles we discussed the Irish War of Independence and the British government's introduction of the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act in August 1920.

About the same time, the Athlone Brigade of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) formed a flying column, a small group whose purpose was to attack the British Crown forces. Those developments signified an escalation of the conflict in Westmeath between August and November 1920.

Targets

Prior to this period, IRA General Headquarters (GHQ) in Dublin had long been dissatisfied by what it considered to be a lack of initiative on the behalf of the IRA in Westmeath. Around the beginning of 1920, GHQ ordered Seamus O'Meara, then commanding officer (O/C) of the Athlone Brigade, to make a more concerted effort to attack the Crown Forces. Despite GHQ's exhortations, it was April 1920 before the IRA in Westmeath took action against the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), burning abandoned barracks as part of a nationwide campaign of attacks on official buildings. That operation was followed in July 1920 by an attack on the RIC barracks in Streamstown during which the IRA failed to capture the barracks or its stock of weapons. O'Meara was soon after replaced as O/C by Thomas Costello, with George Adamson as his second-in-command. The exact date for this change is unclear, although Costello stated that he was Brigade O/C by the time the flying column was created later in 1920.

Despite the problems afflicting the brigade – from a poor supply

of weapons to divisions among its leadership – the burning of RIC barracks did succeed in forcing the police to retreat from many rural areas. That allowed the Athlone Brigade relatively unrestricted movement through much of the county and gave its most active members, including the core who would form the flying column, the impetus to make more determined attacks on the Crown forces. An example of one such attack was the shooting of RIC Sergeant Thomas Craddock, an unmarried army veteran in his early forties, on 22 August 1920.

Craddock, according to both Thomas Costello and Seamus O'Meara, was one of the most aggressive opponents of the IRA's Athlone Brigade. Costello later stated that an IRA raid on a mail train at Fossagh Bridge near Mount Temple had led to the discovery of a letter written by Craddock in which the RIC sergeant 'gave a survey of the whole position in the area', presumably meaning that he had detailed intelligence on the IRA in the locality. In Costello's

version, it was this discovery, along with Craddock's violence against republicans, which caused the IRA to make plans for his assassination. O'Meara claimed that Craddock was targeted partly because he had been a member of a group that had attacked and badly beaten the president of the Mount Temple Sinn Féin Club, Joseph Cunningham. O'Meara also claimed that Michael Collins gave the order to shoot Craddock and then Captain Claude Tully, an Athlone-based intelligence officer in the British army, whose activities we followed in an earlier article.

In instances such as the shooting of Craddock, we may never be able to confirm the accuracy, or otherwise, of accounts such as those by Costello and O'Meara. The dates within O'Meara's account, which was provided to the Bureau of Military History in 1956, are problematic and it is likely that he conflated events that were separated in time. Yet Costello's version is plausible and it suggests that



A unit of the RIC preparing for demobilisation after the War of Independence (National Library of Ireland)

Craddock was involved in intelligence work, perhaps in association with Captain Tully. Whatever the reasons behind the attack on Craddock, it is clear that he was a primary target for the local IRA and that his movements were being watched for weeks, maybe months, beforehand.

Gunfire

Craddock was shot dead by the IRA outside the Comrades of the Great War Club in King Street (now Pearse Street), Athlone. The unit which carried out the attack comprised Thomas Costello, James Tormey, George Manning and Brian Mulvihill. Shortly before midnight on 21 August, Costello, who worked in a shop in the centre of town, received word from a member of the IRA that Craddock had been seen entering the Comrades of the Great War Club. Costello gathered Tormey, Manning and Mulvihill and they positioned themselves near the club's entrance.

According to Constable Denis Mahon, who testified at the subsequent inquest, Craddock and Mahon left the hall around 12.15am. Mahon stated that they came under fire as soon as they stepped on to the footpath. Craddock, who was carrying a revolver, returned fire but was grievously wounded by a bullet to his stomach. Mahon, who was unarmed, ran to Victoria Barracks.

Although British soldiers quickly reached Craddock and carried him to the hospital in Victoria Barracks, he died within the hour.

That the shooting of Craddock took place in an urban area was unusual in Westmeath where attacks on the Crown forces mostly occurred in rural areas. Although newspaper reports stated that Craddock had received threatening letters before his death, it seems that the police did not expect to be attacked in Athlone. The relative inactivity of the local IRA throughout the earlier months of 1920 may have explained the police's lack of safeguards. Testimony provided during the inquest underlines this point. Constable Mahon described the two men leaving their station at Fry Place around 11.15pm and heading to the Comrades of the Great War Club to watch a billiards competition. No guard was posted at the club door and the IRA attackers were able to assemble nearby and remain undetected as they waited for Craddock to emerge.

A fading force

Attacking the RIC in the middle of Athlone carried many risks for the IRA, given that the Crown forces would inevitably launch a major response. Costello recalled that there was intense police and British army

activity in the town over the following weeks. The Connaught side of Athlone was put under curfew and numerous men were arrested although Costello was not among them, suggesting that the police lacked quality intelligence on their enemy. Indeed, throughout the conflict, RIC reports from Westmeath frequently lamented the fact that local people were 'either afraid or unwilling to speak to the police'.

The general public's reticence gives a sense of the situation facing the RIC in August 1920. It was isolated from the population, under attack from the IRA and part of a British campaign that was, to an increasing degree, using reprisals and arbitrary violence against civilians and businesses. That month, rank-and-file members of the RIC in Athlone signed a petition which they sent to their superior officers: 'We consider it is almost an impossibility to carry out our functions as a civil police force under the present circumstances. The strain on the force is so great, by the daily assassinations of our comrades ...' Given such sentiments, it is unsurprising that the rate of RIC resignations rose during 1920, a blight that further debilitated and demoralised the force. Denis Mahon was one of the many who resigned, leaving the RIC less than a month after Craddock's death.

