



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

The shooting of George Johnston



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In an earlier article, we discussed in detail the shooting of alleged spies by the Athlone Brigade of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) during 1920: James Blagriff, Martin Lyons and a man named Maher. It is certain that Blagriff and Maher were shot by members of the Athlone Brigade and it is likely that brigade members also shot Lyons, although the details of those events are often obscured. For example, in the case of James Blagriff, some local IRA officers doubted that Blagriff was a spy. Another supposed spy was George Johnston (sometimes referred to as Johnstone or Johnson). Johnston, who was then in his mid-thirties, was shot dead by the IRA in Baylin, near Athlone, during the night of 11 April 1921.

Spying

According to Seamus O'Meara, a senior member of the Athlone Brigade and its commanding officer (O/C) for much of 1920, the IRA investigated Johnston. Following this investigation, the brigade council met and confirmed its decision to execute Johnston. As in other cases, intercepted letters from IRA raids on mail trains were used to implicate Johnston as a spy. Thomas Costello, O/C of the Athlone Brigade during April 1921, stated that one such raid uncovered a letter to 'the British Intelligence Authorities which seemed to indicate that he was the principal intelligence agent for the county'. Johnston, according to O'Meara, was 'a prime agent' for Captain Claude Tully, a military intelligence officer for the British army's 13th Infantry Brigade, headquartered in Athlone's Victoria Barracks. Tully, whose activities we followed in an earlier article, regularly accompanied British army raiding parties and, to judge from contemporary accounts, he developed a network of informants and contacts in the region.

Tully seems to have been an effective intelligence officer. Anthony McCormack, a captain of the IRA's Tang Company, was arrested by the Crown forces in January 1921 and taken to Athlone's barracks, where he was interrogated by Tully. McCormack later recalled that he was 'astonished' that Tully already knew the whereabouts of an IRA arms dump used by the Tang Company. Tully's activities made him a target for the IRA and O'Meara later claimed that Michael Collins ordered the Athlone Brigade to assassinate the British officer. Tully, however, was never negligent when it came to his personal



security and he avoided numerous IRA attempts to ambush him.

'He struggled violently'

There is no evidence to prove or disprove the claim made by both Costello and O'Meara that Johnston was an informant for Tully. However, Tully could not have carried out his intelligence work without maintaining a network of contacts in the region and Johnston may have been one of those people from whom he obtained local information on IRA activities and personalities.

Whatever the reasons behind the attack, a later account of Johnston's shooting makes for grim reading. It was described by Henry O'Brien, who was part of the execution party, which comprised seven or eight people: 'We went to his house, but he was not at home. A local boy told us that he was in the house of a neighbour [the house of Margaret and Thomas Henry]. We went to this house and asked for him. When he heard his name being mentioned he made an attempt to get out by the back door of the house, but one of our fellows grabbed him before he could get out of the kitchen.'

O'Brien described the shooting, which took place in front of Margaret Henry and her children: 'He struggled violently, tearing one of our men's coats right off him and fought like a tiger. It was apparent that he realised he was for it and he fought with all his power to get away. We were compelled to shoot him in the kitchen of the house where he was. We took his body some distance from the house and having put the usual label, as was done in some cases, on it, left him there.' The usual label that O'Brien referred to

was a card bearing the line: 'Spies and Traitors beware. I.R.A.'

Suspicious

Johnston was Protestant but the other three alleged spies mentioned above, Blagriff, Lyons and Maher, appear to have been Roman Catholic and there is no evidence of sectarian motives in the IRA's targeting of Johnston. There is, however, the possibility that a land dispute lay behind the attack. Johnston was described by contemporary newspapers such as the *Westmeath Examiner* as 'an extensive farmer' and Frank O'Connor, an officer in the Athlone Brigade's Coosan Company, recalled that Johnston 'had been a gamekeeper in earlier years and, as such, was responsible for a number of prosecutions against individuals.' Thomas Costello was among those who had previously been in confrontation with Johnston. In April 1920, Costello was arrested, along with two of his brothers, for driving cattle from a farm belonging to Johnston.

Perhaps Costello and other locals held a grudge against Johnston but this is speculation and such land disputes may be unconnected to the events of April 1921. Frank O'Connor also stated that Johnston, whom he claimed had 'actually fired at some of our men one morning', was considered by the Athlone Brigade to be 'the principal enemy agent in the county'. Although that claim cannot be verified, a contemporary British War Office file, which detailed the location and date of Johnston's death, stated that he was a 'Loyalist'. While that description does not mean that Johnston was an informer,

it indicates that he was a supporter, at least in spirit, of the Crown forces.

Throughout the War of Independence, the IRA was constantly fearful of the damage that could be caused by spies and informers. In Westmeath, for example, it is likely that the Mullingar Brigade was undermined by informers within its own ranks. During October and November 1920, that brigade was weakened when the Crown forces carried out a series of mass arrests following the IRA's kidnapping of a Resident Magistrate and a Justice of the Peace. Many of the brigade's leading officers were arrested, a pattern that was repeated throughout the conflict. In one instance, during April 1921, the Athlone Brigade sent an officer to Mullingar with orders to get the IRA 'actively going in that area in order to draw off the enemy pressure on ours.' This officer, David Daly from Moate, had little time to make a difference as he was captured during a raid by Black and Tans while approaching Mullingar.

The timing of Daly's arrest suggests that the Crown forces had gained ample intelligence on local republicans, although the Mullingar Brigade was more badly afflicted in this regard than its counterpart in Athlone. It is likely that some, perhaps most, of that information was gathered from informers. James Maguire, O/C of the Mullingar Brigade, later voiced his suspicions: 'It often struck me that someone was giving information to the enemy in our area.' Maguire was probably correct to be suspicious although, as is often the case when discussing alleged spies and informers during the War of Independence, the documentary evidence does not provide a definitive answer.

