



# HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

## The Name's Hardy, Frank Hardy



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In September 1920, newspapers in Ireland and Britain carried remarkable reports of a secret meeting that had recently taken place in Dublin: a meeting that had resulted in the unmasking of an English spy called Frank Hardy.

This man had arrived in Ireland with the aim of capturing Michael Collins. Hardy's plan was to pose as a counter-spy, a double-agent who would slowly earn the trust of republican leaders by pretending to work against British forces. Yet two major problems stood between Hardy and his goal: he wasn't good at his job and IRA intelligence was aware of his past activities at various locations around Ireland, including Athlone.

### Fraud, Forgery and Failure

Frank Hardy, from Plymouth in England, was a career criminal. Born in the 1860s, he used numerous aliases to conduct bigamy, fraud, forgery and theft. By 1918, Hardy, using the alias Frank Saville, was in Enniskillen and running a scam in which he pretended to be a sales agent. He placed advertisements in newspapers for the sale of quantities of stout, which would be sent to purchasers on receipt of a cheque.

According to contemporary newspapers, many publicans answered the advertisements and sent cheques to Hardy but the stout never arrived. One such publican was a Mrs. Murphy, based in Tuam, who informed the police in an attempt to recover the £50 that she had sent to Hardy. The police issued a warrant for Hardy, causing him to depart Enniskillen. Athlone would be his next destination.

Hardy, accompanied by a young woman who claimed to be his wife



A photo of Frank Hardy during his youth. Although most commonly known as Frank Hardy, that was just one of his many fakenames. His real name was John Henry Gooding.

(or one of his wives), took lodgings in Auburn Terrace, described in newspapers of the time as 'a residential quarter occupied principally by commercial men, the higher-paid officials of the local mills, etc, and some local banking officials'.

Hardy generally followed the same pattern on arriving in a new town, seeking to meet and befriend influential people in the locality. In Athlone, Hardy posed as a government official and quickly formed a connection with a local religious figure although he also drew unwanted attention from the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC).

### Hue and Cry

Athlone's RIC barracks had recently received the latest copy of a police newspaper known as

the Hue and Cry which contained physical descriptions of those wanted for crimes. Hardy's details were included in the paper, which noted that he was distinguishable by a white spot on the back of his head. Armed with such details, the local RIC Head Constable, an officer named Feeney, deduced that the newly-arrived Frank Saville was none other than Frank Hardy.

Feeney later recalled that Hardy was able to 'converse volubly on any subject' and could 'talk an ordinary man inside out'. Feeney saw that side of Hardy when he paid a visit to his lodgings in Auburn Terrace. Hardy became indignant when Feeney informed him of the arrest warrant and then tried to bluff his way out of the situation by claiming that the warrant actually referred to his

brother who was, apparently, due to arrive in Athlone.

Feeney was not fooled by the bluster and escorted Hardy to the RIC barracks, where he was detained. Hardy was subsequently found guilty of operating under false pretences and forgery, then sentenced to five years penal servitude in April 1919. He was released later that year and, at some point thereafter, recruited by British intelligence services to act as an agent in Ireland.

### Careless Words

On returning to Ireland in 1920, Hardy offered his services to the IRA as part of his plan to work as a double-agent. Michael Collins lured Hardy into a meeting chaired by Arthur Griffith in which the English spy was to offer his services to Collins' intelligence network. Hardy was met by Griffith and what he was told were the assembled leaders of the IRA.

While Hardy expounded on his plans as a potential counter-spy, the 'leaders' – who were actually journalists that had been invited by Griffith – read a dossier compiled by Collins. This dossier detailed Hardy's many frauds and it explained how a visit to Athlone had led to his downfall. At the end of the meeting, Griffith informed Hardy of the trap and told him that he should leave the country that night, a warning which Hardy heeded.

Newspapers such as the Irish Independent presented detailed reports on the 'English Spy Unmasked' and the incident was excellent propaganda for republican claims that Britain was using criminal elements in its war in Ireland. There were American, Italian, Spanish, English and French journalists at the meeting and the drama of the staged exposé proved irresistible to the media.

For a brief spell, Hardy, the fraudster who had been apprehended in Athlone, became internationally famous, a byword for incompetence and British policies in Ireland.

