



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY



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The death of Michael Collins

A thrill of horror', according to the *Westmeath Independent*, 'of shame, of despair, of the deepest distress went through the length and breadth of our land on Wednesday morning last when it was learned that General Michael Collins had been shot dead in Cork. Another great Irishman is gone; another great loss has been sustained by Ireland.' Days earlier, on 22 August 1922, Michael Collins was shot dead at Béal na Bláth in West Cork. In this article, we explore the reactions of people in Athlone and Moate to an event that stands as a singular moment in modern Irish history.

'Forgive them'

In assessing Collins' life and legacy, the *Westmeath Independent* continued: 'Michael Collins dared death many a time for Ireland; his brains and pluck, his body and spirit were devoted to his country's service. If any one man deserved the title of "The Man who Won the War," he did. He fought the British, he outmanoeuvred them, he forced them to acknowledge Irish Independence, he wrung the Treaty out of them, and now he lies dead, slain by a fellow countryman's bullet.' Those words were likely written by Cathail Ó Tuathail, who became editor of the *Westmeath Independent* when it returned to publication in February 1922, following the destruction of its offices by the British Crown forces in November 1920. The paper, still owned by the Chapman family, was an ardent supporter of the Treaty, which Ó Tuathail saw as 'evidence of victory' over Britain.

In the editions after Collins' death, the *Westmeath Independent*, many of its columns encased in black borders, provided readers with detailed accounts of the ambush in which Collins was fatally wounded. Those accounts mostly originated in the National Army's publicity department and they provided an embellished version of events, including the assertion that over 200 anti-Treaty IRA soldiers attacked the small convoy in which Collins was travelling through Cork (the actual figure was probably between 20 and 30). One statement from the National Army's publicity department claimed that Collins,

although fatally wounded, returned fire until the very end. His last words, according to that official account, were directed at his anti-Treaty opponents: 'Forgive them'.

Despite the *Westmeath Independent's* pro-Treaty sentiments, there is little reason to doubt its depiction of local reactions to Collins' death. According to the *Westmeath Independent*, 'people were simply horror-stricken that such a leader should have been so foully done to death by his own countrymen in their mad campaign of fratricide'. Across the region, sports events and regattas were cancelled and activities such as auctions were postponed. In Athlone, the Urban District Council deplored the loss of Collins, describing him as Ireland's 'Commander-in-Chief'. Moate, according to contemporary newspaper reports, was 'plunged into a state of mourning on Wednesday morning, when the Dublin papers arrived containing the wholly unexpected announcement of the assassination of General Michael Collins'.

'the freedom of Ireland'

A day later, the members of Westmeath County Council unanimously agreed to postpone its scheduled meeting, following a motion put forward by Athlone-based member P.J. Henry, in whose house Collins had stayed while visiting the area. In making his proposal, Henry included Collins with Arthur Griffith and Harry Boland [both of whom had died earlier in August: Griffith through illness, Boland after being shot by National Army troops] as 'one of the standard-bearers for the freedom of Ireland'. It was, he said, 'the greatest loss the nation has ever seen to lose three such men'.

In the midlands, the media gave prominence to the opinions of Athlone-born Michael Curley, recently installed as Archbishop of Baltimore in the United States. Curley, on a visit to Ireland at the time, was interviewed by the *Westmeath Independent*. Apart from lauding Collins, Curley condemned the anti-Treaty campaign, using the Provisional Government-approved term 'Irregulars' to describe the anti-Treaty IRA, of whom he said: 'They may justify themselves by some roundabout mode of reasoning but, to us who are looking at conditions objectively, their actions seem nothing short of criminal.' The 'Irish people in



Athlone-born tenor John McCormack laying a wreath in 1923 at the cenotaph of Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith on the grounds of Leinster House (National Library of Ireland). The cenotaph was later replaced by another monument that still stands and which honours Collins, Griffith and Kevin O'Higgins.

America', he told the paper, would have preferred to hear that Collins was killed by 'the bullet of the English soldier' rather than 'being slaughtered in the County Cork by brother Irishmen'.

Archbishop Curley also played a prominent role in the Athlone ceremonies held on 28 August, the day of Collins's funeral in Dublin. On that day shops in the town remained closed until 1pm, while local factories suspended business from 11am to 2pm. Masses were held in the Franciscan Church and in St. Mary's Church, where Curley presided. Both churches were thronged with people but it was the mass in St. Peter's Church which drew the largest crowd. In attendance were divisional and brigade staff officers from Custume Barracks, who were accompanied by a guard of honour, a firing party, and a detachments of troops under Lieutenant-commandant Bernard Garrahan, the commanding officer of the barracks.

'untimely and tragic death'

Afterwards, the National Army troops formed up and began to march towards the castle, accompanied by a brass

and reed band, and the clergy who officiated at the mass. An estimated three thousand people watched this funeral parade and a contemporary journalist described what happened next: 'From the church to the Castle Square the procession slowly wended its way, to the mournful strains of the funeral march played by the brass and reed band under the direction of Mr. B. Burke, via O'Connell Street, King Street and Barrack Street. At the Castle Square they formed up in square formation where members of the National Army formed a cordon to prevent the immense crowds encroaching. The clergy, officers, and firing party took up their positions in the centre of the square.' The firing party fired three volleys. Buglers then sounded the Last Post, while the soldiers presented arms and the officers stood to salute. The scene, according to the *Westmeath Independent*, 'was a very affecting one in keeping with the feelings aroused by the untimely and tragic death of Ireland's great soldier and statesman.'

Despite the myriad manifestations

of sorrow the conflict continued to rage nationally and locally. Three days after Collins's death, an anti-Treaty IRA unit ambushed a car containing Athlone-based officers and soldiers of the National Army as it drove through Glasson. Five people were wounded by gunfire, three fatally: Patrick Murtagh, a civilian, Seán McCormack, a lieutenant in the National Army and Albert Hayes, a National Army volunteer. McCormack, from Moate, died at the scene, while Murtagh, a local egg-dealer from Wineport who was travelling through Glasson on a horse-and-cart at the time of the ambush, died in a local doctor's house. Hayes, from Tullamore, died over a week later from complications related to his wounds. Such ambushes signified that the anti-Treaty IRA, despite being pushed back in many areas, retained the ability to carry out guerrilla attacks throughout the country. In future articles, we will look in more detail at the Glasson ambush and the Civil War in the locality.

