



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Athlone and Moate attacked: October 1920



IAN KENNEALLY
Historian and Author

It was almost 9pm on Friday night, October 22 1920, and the streets of Athlone were full of people - there was no warning of what was about to occur, that those people would soon be in the midst of a reprisal by British forces and that a civilian named Michael Burke would be shot dead.

Before we discuss the reprisal of Friday, October 22, it is necessary to briefly discuss earlier events. Around August or September 1920, the IRA's Athlone Brigade, following orders from General Headquarters in Dublin, formed a flying column in an attempt to counter the increased activity of the British Crown forces. The column contained about fifteen men, mostly officers who were 'on the run'. It was led by James Tormey, a 21-year-old veteran of the British army, one of at least five ex-soldiers in the column. The group had, according to one of its members, only ten service rifles with about twenty rounds of ammunition each.

Ambush and reprisal

The flying column's first major action was on the 22 October 1920 at Parkwood near Moate. That day, the IRA column ambushed a convoy of Black and Tans who were being transferred from the main police barracks in Gormanstown, County Meath, to Galway. The flying column succeeded in surprising the convoy, shooting dead one of the Crown forces, an English recruit named Harry Biggs, before escaping. However that was not the end of the day's violence.

After the ambush, the Black and Tan convoy was stranded at Parkwood but was reinforced later in the day by, as described in contemporary newspapers, 'two lorries of police, one lorry of soldiers and an armoured car'. About 7.30pm, this expanded convoy left Parkwood in the direction of Athlone. The Westmeath Examiner described what happened next: 'It was on the return journey the armed forces

gave themselves up to an unbridled licence and fired all the way to Athlone and through it until their munitions were exhausted'.

As the Crown forces drove through Moate they fired indiscriminately from their vehicles. An eight year old girl was grazed by a bullet while a woman was shot in the right arm. Members of the convoy directed their fire into shop fronts and domestic residences, shattering windows along the main street. The convoy had entered the town at the same time 'as the October devotions were concluded' and many people were in the vicinity of St. Patrick's Church. There was a scene of panic as the crowd attempted to seek shelter inside the building.

Shooting in Athlone

After driving through Moate, the Crown forces made their way to Athlone, arriving at around 9pm. The town was particularly busy since that was a shopping night and shops were doing a brisk business. There were large congregations in both the Franciscan Church and St. Mary's Church.

When the convoy arrived at Castlemaine Street, it slackened speed and a volley of rifle and revolver fire rang out. People fled in all directions, taking cover in the nearest houses. The shooting continued through Irishtown and, according to contemporary reports, 'loud explosions were distinctly heard in St. Mary's Church'. Inside the church, people rushed from their places to the altar rails, many of them screaming. Rev. J. Lennon, C.C., who was officiating, counselled the congregation to kneel down and place their trust in God but outside the shooting continued.

The convoy then reached Church Street, where Michael Burke, a popular figure and a member of the town's urban district council, was about to cross the street to his house when a bullet pierced the left side of his head over the ear. When Burke fell to the ground, a corporal of the Royal Field Artillery, stationed in Athlone barracks, and a Mr. Leonard, who lived on Main Street, rushed from a nearby house where they had taken cover. Despite being under rifle fire, they managed to reach Burke and with the help of others carried the stricken man into the house of Mrs. Farrell



British soldiers leaving Athlone Barracks. During the War of Independence, the barracks was an important centre for the Crown forces. (Photo: Athlone Public Library)

on Church Street. In the meantime, the gunfire continued as the lorries proceeded towards the town bridge. Then, as the convoy reached the barracks, the shooting stopped.

Newspapers reported that the convoy fired an estimated 1,000 rounds in Athlone and that they also discharged grenades. Not long after the shooting ended, 'a large force of military' left Athlone barracks and drove to Moate, arriving around 10.30pm. Those soldiers began firing their weapons as they entered Moate, although there is no evidence that they had been shot at or threatened in any way. On hearing the gunfire, many locals feared that another reprisal was in progress and they fled into adjoining fields. Amid the confusion, a local man was shot and wounded by a British soldier.

Aftermath

Despite the bravery of those who assisted Burke, he died a few days later in a Dublin hospital, leaving behind his wife and family. The reprisals, especially the shooting of

Burke, caused 'immense sensation and indignation' in Westmeath. He was, according to newspaper reports, 'one of the most prominent public men during the Nationalist movement' and had been a public figure for about twenty years. The Westmeath Examiner paid tribute to Burke, providing a brief outline of his political career writing that 'he headed a Nationalist party who were returned at the municipal election last January, but at the latter county elections ... he retired, though certain of election'. Since then, Burke had taken no part in public affairs.

It is not clear if any of the convoy's soldiers or police were subsequently disciplined for their conduct in Athlone and Moate, actions which led to the death of one civilian and the wounding of at least three others. The October report of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) Inspector General, for example, made no mention of the reprisals. In London, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Hamar Greenwood, told the House of Commons that the Crown forces 'accidentally shot' Burke after the

convoy had been attacked in Athlone. In making this claim, Greenwood ignored all the available evidence, as well as the fact that the convoy began its reprisal in Moate, long before it reached Athlone. Greenwood received much criticism, both in Ireland and Britain, for his account of events and he soon modified his claim that the convoy had been attacked in Athlone.

Burke's death and the reprisals in Moate and Athlone signalled that Westmeath was facing a dangerous period. During that same week, republicans in Mullingar received letters from a group calling itself the 'Anti-Sinn Fein Society' - a cover name used by sections of the Crown forces. The recipients were, newspapers reported, 'given a certain time to clear out of the town, failing which they would be shot'. Similar warnings were sent to republicans in Tullamore and elsewhere. As October 1920 came to a conclusion, the region was primed for further violence but the locations and the victims were yet to be determined.

