

Roscrea Executions

On the seventh of January 1922 the Anglo Irish Treaty was passed into the Dáil by 64 votes to 57. Éamon De Valera, Cathal Brugha and Austin Stack resigned and the country was divided. This was the start of a shameful civil war that was to pit brother against brother. People who had fought shoulder to shoulder now found themselves on opposite sides in this bloody conflict that was to leave 1,250 Irish men and women dead. 77 of these were executed.

Among those were 4 Tipperary men who were executed in Roscrea by the Free State Army. On the 23rd of December 1922 Fredrick Bourke, Martin O'Shea and Patrick Russell aged 17 held up and robbed a mail car on the Nenagh to Borrisoleigh road. The driver of the mail car told them that the military were close behind but they didn't believe him.

They took refuge in Ross Cottage which was close by and soon the Free State Army were upon them. The commander of the troops on the day was a local man and was a personal friend of all three and had fought side by side with them previously. He said that he alone would approach the cottage and that no one was to fire until he gave the signal – a single shot in the air.

He told them "I will give you 5 minutes to escape and then I will inform the troops that this house is empty". He waited the full 5 minutes before returning to the road and just as he did in their hurry to get away one of the guns went off. Thinking this was the signal the troops opened fire and following a four-hour battle the troops stormed the house and overpowered the men. They were taken to Templemore and charged with possession of 2 rifles, 100 rounds of ammunition, a Thompson sub-machine gun and bom- making equipment. They were found guilty and sentenced to death by firing squad.

The sentence was deferred because the people of Templemore were angry and the fact that the bishop of Cashel and Emily Dr Harty, in a last ditch effort to save the men, gave a directive to his priests to refuse them absolution. The Free State authorities got around this by transferring them to Roscrea in the Killaloe Diocese. Roscrea was seen as a very conservative town and very pro-treaty at the time.

About this time Patrick McNamara and Michael Kennedy from Nenagh both members of the First Tipperary Brigade were captured with arms near Portroe. They were taken to Roscrea barracks where they were brutally beaten, tried and sentenced to death. Michael Kennedy got a reprieve by the intervention of a Free State officer.

During their detention the men were allowed no visitors except Father Moloney the local priest who said mass with them and gave them absolution on the morning of their executions. The execution date was a closely guarded secret. The firing squad were drafted in from other areas and wore no badges of identification.

On the morning of January 15th 1923 the four men were taken out to the small courtyard before 8 am. A soldier who had witnessed the executions said many years later that they went quietly and gave no trouble.

The firing party consisted of eight men – two assigned to each prisoner – with one gun having blanks and one having live ammunition.

The shots rang out around the town as the bell for eight o'clock mass was ringing. The four men were pronounced dead shortly afterwards. The bullet holes can still be seen in the wall where they were shot. They were taken away and buried between the wall supports in the back garden of the castle.

In October 1924 when the Civil War was over the bodies were exhumed and reburied in their respective parishes

Written in the toilet beside the cell where the men were kept which was demolished in the 1980's were the words;

"Shea, Bourke, Mc Namara, and young Russel after tomorrow there will be R.I.P after our names."

This is a copy of Martin O'Shea's last letter

Dear Josie

"I feel it hard for the last time to pen these few lines. Fred, Patrick and myself will be executed tomorrow morning at eight o'clock. From the bottom of our hearts we thank God for the long day we are getting and we are very glad that we weren't killed in Ross. We offer ourselves to almighty God this night that by our deaths it may bring peace and happiness to the land we are about to leave and hope our executions will be the last for Ireland's freedom. We are quite satisfied with God's will. Tell our friends we send them our last love and blessing also our comrades.

I ask you to have no spite for those who arrested us. We forgive every one of them. We forgive those who signed our executions. We forgive those who are about to execute us. To Mrs. Ryan and family, to all our neighbours and friends we send our love. I will pray for you all in Heaven. I feel very much for our people. May God comfort them in their hard trial. I feel quite happy in every other way. We hope to meet you all in Heaven. Goodbye dear Josie get all our friends to pray for us. We only have a few more hours when we will be standing before our God.

Martin.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a nAnamnacha

COVERED WITH WREATHS!

Roscrea (3)—Business in the town was completely suspended yesterday when the remains of Patk. M'Namara, Patk. Russell, Fred Burke, and Martin O'Shea were handed over. Large crowds, headed by a band, took part in the funeral procession through the town. The coffins were covered with wreaths. Councillor O'Byrne, chairman, North Tipperary Co. Council, was amongst those present. A cyclist contingent and many motor cars accompanied the remains. M'Namara's body was taken to Ballina, Tipperary, via Nenagh, where another imposing demonstration took place, and the remains of the other three were conveyed for interment in Ileigh, Borrissoleigh, their native place. All business was suspended in Templemore whilst the procession passed through.

This snippet from the papers of the day sums up the patriotic reverence with which the funeral of Bourke, O'Shea, Russell and McNamara was received in all places through which it passed.

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The following two pictures of the funeral cavalcade demonstrate the crowds described above and were taken in Rosemary Square.

