

The following exclusive Tribune feature on the Pearsons is partly based on two illustrated lectures Philip McConway gave this year. The first lecture on 15 January at the Offaly Historical and Archaeological Society (OHAS) in Tullamore was entitled 'Spies, Informers, and Militant Loyalists: The Intelligence War in Offaly 1920-21'. The article also contains material taken from a lecture he delivered to Birr Historical Society 'The South Offaly No. 2 Brigade Irish Republican Army, 1920-21' on 15 October. The recent RTÉ Hidden History documentary 'The Killings at Coolacree' referred to him as the author of the 'The IRA in Offaly, 1920-21'. This is inaccurate. This was the subject of an M.Phil thesis which will be published at a later date. In his contribution, which was heavily edited, he was also quoted as saying the Pearson women were present at the execution. This is not his position having reassessed all the available evidence some months ago. On 25 September he notified this position in writing to the director stating it was dubious the Pearson women witnessed the execution.



William Pearson



William Stanley



J.J. Horan arrested and imprisoned in Tullamore Jail. He was later interned in the Rath Camp, Curragh. The Pearsons were widely believed to be responsible for his arrest.



Thomas Burke, GHQ organiser and later O/C Offaly No. 2 Brigade IRA.



John Dillon, a victim of the Pearson's informing activities. He was imprisoned in Tullamore Jail and later transferred to the Rath Internment Camp.



Peter Lyons, Intelligence Officer, 'D' Drumcullen Company. Peripheral involvement in the Pearson executions supplying a rifle to the Active Service Unit (ASU) who acted as the firing squad.



Michael McCormack, O/C, 3rd Southern Division (Offaly, Laois and North Tipperary). He was critical of the No. 2 Brigade's poor sniping abilities.



Michael Cordial wearing a Free State Army uniform where he served with the rank of Lieutenant. He was the IRA 3rd Battalion's (Kilcormac) quartermaster.

The Pearsons Of Coolacree

PART 1

BACKGROUND
THE Pearson family owned an extensive 341 acre farm at Coolacree, over a mile from Cadamstown and four miles from Kinnity. Originally a native of the Ballygeehan townland in Co. Laois, William Pearson bought the land in 1911 for £2,000. He avoided employing local labourers to work the sizable farm. He explained how he saved the expense of hiring workmen as "one man interested in the work would be worth six who were not."

COONEYITES PROVOKE HOSTILE REACTION

Such was the intense anger the sect incited, whole communities often turned against them. On occasion Edward Cooney received police protection because of the fury he fermented amongst the general public. In Newtownards the townspeople threatened to expel Cooneyites as they were similarly "hunted out" of Ballynahinch. At Strangford Lough the Cooneyites were "almost driven into the sea." In Swords windows were smashed at a house where the sect met requiring police intervention. In England the sect stirred up a hostile reaction. A crowd of 3,000 men and women drove Cooneyite "Go Preachers" out of the quaint market town at Sudbury in West Suffolk. Overseers of the neighbouring parishes issued a signed statement warning the country people against the "Tramp Preachers," while a number of ministers of various denominations also signed a similar caution. At Debenham the quiet countryside was reported to be in "uproar" over the activities of the sect.

THE PEARSON'S RELIGIOUS BIGOTRY

Although the young Pearson boys once hailed for the local national school team the family later developed a disdain for their Republican neighbours. In an arms raid in the area the IRA forcibly seized two guns from the Pearsons who refused to hand them over. From 1918 onwards houses of farmers and others known to possess shotguns were targeted by Irish Volunteers. Arms were collected from those who were friendly to Republicans and commandeered from Loyalists. Patrick O'Riordan, Vice Commandant of the 4th Battalion (Birr), recalled that "generally speaking, the owners of the guns, Catholic and Protestant alike, gave them up to us voluntarily when we called, and in very few cases had the guns to be seized by threat or force."

PROTESTANT OPPOSITION TO COONEYISM

Protestants emerged as the most robust opponents of the sect. In the preface to Reverend Simon Carter Armstrong's pamphlet 'The Cooneyites or Dippers published in 1910 the sect was castigated for its "pernicious teaching." Armstrong warned anyone who gave "help or countenance to them" as "false to his Christian profession, and a traitor to his Church." Some Protestants resented the presence of the sect in their local community whom they regarded as troublesome outsiders. A fiercely critical letter by 'A Loyal Subject' appeared in the King's County Chronicle (19 April, 1900) protesting against a meeting of the sect in a wooden hall erected at Bourney, midway between Roscrea and Templemore: "These obstinate and self-opinionated saints...The whole thing has so far proved only

disgusting hypocrisy and profanity, and a moral nuisance in the neighbourhood." In an article in the Impartial Reporter (13 July, 1917), the sect was described as "a movement which most sane people would regard as mischievous."

10,000 people. At an anti-conscription meeting in Tullamore bricks and other missile were thrown injuring a number of Volunteers. The RIC complained how the IRA's war in Offaly 'would have waned before this [May 1921], if the influence of the women had not kept it alive.' Ernie O'Malley, a leading IRA Commander, observed: "The girls and women glorified the fighting...The women were more bitter than the men."

The Pearson's bitterness towards their community heightened following a heated argument between Richard and John Dillon, a local Republican. The family was almost certainly to blame when John Dillon and another Republican JJ Horan, were later arrested. The Pearsons were said to have gloated over the arrests by erecting white flags on their farm in a triumphant display of loyalist supremacy and mocked the IRA for having "surrendered."

The Pearson's openly courted Crown force support and their actions were vigorously aggressive and provocative. Michael Cordial, Quartermaster, 3rd Battalion (Kilcormac), South Offaly No. 2 Brigade IRA stated: "They were - particularly - so, the male members of the family, father and three sons - violently opposed to the National Movement and they looked with contempt on local Volunteers or IRA men." As with numerous informers and opponents of the IRA in Offaly the family was warned several times to refrain from antagonising Republicans. Richard threatened to burn down the house of a Volunteer who warned him.

REPUBLICAN STRATEGY HARDENS TOWARDS LOYALIST COLLABORATORS

Since March 1921 Dail Eireann accepted formal responsibility for the actions of the IRA. According to the RIC and the British Army the majority of people sympathised and supported the IRA in Offaly by the time of the execution of the Pearson brothers. In June 1921 the RIC in Offaly complained of "losing the support of the large section in every community, who like to be on the winning side." The Offaly IRA was in the ascent and experiencing widespread support. The popular legitimacy of Republicans was reflected in their substantial democratic mandate both at a local and national level as well as the success of the arbitration courts. In a fatal misjudgement the Pearsons banked on British victory and Republican defeat. By June 1921 the burning of loyalist collaborators' homes, spear-



The ruins of the Pearson family farm at Coolacree, over a mile from Cadamstown and four miles from Kinnity.

headed by the Cork IRA, was standard IRA policy. However, no person was regarded as an 'Enemy of Ireland, whether they may be described locally as Unionist, Orangeman, etc. except that they are actively anti-Irish in their outlook and in their actions.' The Pearsons were aggressive in their outlook and, above all, in their actions. Republicans pointed out how, until a very late stage in the war, there was no retaliation by the IRA when the houses and property of Republicans were destroyed by the Crown forces. This strategy of restraint was counter productive as the Crown forces continued their reprisals with gusto while giving a free hand to loyalist collaborators.

On 22 June 1921, eight days before the execution of the Pearsons, an IRA General Order on counter-reprisals with the sanction of Dail Eireann was circulated. The order was deemed necessary to prevent destruction by the Crown forces of Republican houses and property. The order outlined how it was 'desirable' that 'the most active enemies of Ireland' should be ordered out of the country or have their lands confiscated. Republicans highlighted how the policy of moderation failed:

THE RESTRAINT AND MODERATION...UNDER WELL NIGH INTOLERABLE PROVOCATION, TO RETALIATE WITH METHODS EMPLOYED BY THE ENEMY HAD NO EFFECT UPON THE CONSCIENCE OR POLICY OF THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT AND A DEPLORABLE SMALL EFFECT UPON THEIR FEELINGS.

ATTEMPTED KILLING OF IRA VOLUNTEERS

From their intimate relationship with the Crown forces the Pearsons developed a false sense of security. The Pearson brothers became more emboldened and militant in challenging the IRA. In June 1921 Volunteers from the local Kinnity "C" Company, 3rd Battalion were ordered to fell a tree to block the road at Coolacree. The planned road-block, a routine military operation for Volunteers, was in place for an anticipated attack on Crown forces in Birr. Shortly after midnight the three eldest Pearson brothers, Richard, 24, Sidney, 20, Abraham, 19 fired with shotguns on the Volunteers cutting down a tree. Two Volunteers were wounded, one of whom received a serious stomach injury.

In June 1921 Burke complained to GHQ over the executions of two informers, one in Cloghan and another near Belmont, that "Warnings in such cases [sic] useless." In relation to several other people strongly suspected of informing in the area Burke declared it was "practically impossible to get proof of their guilt." An informer ordered out of an area later joined the Black and Tans and subsequently 'convicted several men arrested in the district on various charges.' Tipperary IRA leader Dan Breen stressed: "Our only mistake may have been that we set at liberty many whom we had ample evidence; they received the benefit of the slightest doubt."

Militant loyalism not informing sealed the Pearson's fate. In a report sent to GHQ Burke recorded the reasons why he ordered the execution of the two Pearson brothers and the burning of their home: "The men who fired were recognised by the men present to be these three brothers named Pearson. These Pearson brothers were sons of a Protestant [sic] farmer in the district. They had always displayed open hostility towards the IRA and have been active in promoting the Ulster Volunteer movement in their district in which there are a number of 'Planters.' Having satisfied myself by enquiries from the Coy Capt, Kinnity, and Officers present at Battalion Council, that there was no doubt about the identity of the men who fired, I ordered that these men be executed and their houses destroyed. Destruction of their premises was essential to remove other members of the family from the district to safeguard our forces. The enemy is kept well informed of the actions and personnel of our force in the district and arrests have been frequent. There is good ground for suspecting the family of transmitting information. Two of these men - Pearsons - were duly executed on 1/7/21 [sic] and their houses destroyed by fire..."

IT IS POSSIBLE BURKE RECEIVED AUTHORISATION FROM A SENIOR IRA LEADER, MICHAEL MCCORMACK, O/C 3RD SOUTHERN DIVISION (COVERING OFFALY, LAOIS, AND NORTH TIPPERARY) WHICH WAS ESTABLISHED IN MAY 1921.

RIC AND IRA UNANIMITY ON MOTIVE FOR EXECUTION

In the monthly report for June 1921, sent to GHQ, Joseph Reddin, Adjutant No. 2 Brigade, wrote: "Two hostile Unionists executed for levying War on members of this Coy [Kinnity] when operating on road blockade a week previous. Also the house and its contents were destroyed." At the Military Court of Inquiry in lieu of an inquest the RIC Queen's County Inspector maintained the motive for the execution was that Richard and Abraham Pearson saw two men, "Sinn Feiners," felling a tree on their land adjoining the road and told the men to clear off. When they refused the Pearsons fetched two guns, fired at and wounded two men. Both the RIC and IRA were firm and unequivocal over the motive for the execution. There was no ambiguity.

THE EXECUTION OF RICHARD AND ABRAHAM PEARSON

Up to thirty IRA Volunteers were involved in the operation to execute the Pearson brothers and burn down their house. The Volunteers were mostly drawn from the 3rd Battalion comprising four companies: 'A' Killagey, 'B' Kilcormac, 'C' Kinnity and 'D' Drumcullen. The main ASU numbered about ten men, armed with rifles, who acted as the firing squad. On 30 June 1921, at 4 p.m.

of his wounds in the County Infirmary eight days later leaving a widow and six children. Liam Dignam, 23, O/C 1st Battalion (Clara), No. 2 Brigade was wounded by the Black and Tans in Clara on 25 October 1920. Dignam, who was unarmed, was shot in the back, above the right kidney, leaving a large wound while trying to escape with his companions into a house. He fell at a door step writhing in agony. Removed to the County Infirmary he succumbed to his wounds on 21 March 1921.

Peter Lyons, IRA Intelligence Officer: "They [IRA] did what they should do." The day before the execution Sidney, the third target, left with his father to attend a wedding festival in Tipperary from where they proceeded to Mountmellick. The IRA, using hay sprinkled with petrol, set fire to the Pearson home and out houses which were completely destroyed. Ricks of hay and straw were also burned. A group of Volunteers transferring the arms used in the execution back to Kinnity were surrounded by Crown forces but managed to escape. IRA Volunteer Peter Lyons had a peripheral involvement in the execution. He, along with another Volunteer, collected a rifle at Cloghan which was transferred to other Volunteers who in turn gave it to the IRA firing squad. Lyons blocked the road to prevent any surprise Crown force patrol interfering with the execution. A party of Volunteers were in position in Kinnity to harass any attempt by the Crown forces to carry out a reprisal. Over sixty years after the event Lyons remained unrepentant: "People look back now and say didn't the IRA do this, and didn't the IRA do that, but they did what they should do. I mean to say those two went out and fired on them where they were fighting for their country."

PROPAGANDA FALL OUT

The Pearson's mother, sisters, and two cousins claimed to have witnessed the execution. It is dubious if any of the Pearson women were permitted to view the execution. In the words of Ethel Pearson, a sister of the executed brothers: "My mother who was in a fainting condition was carried by my two brothers into a little wood we call the Grove and we all went with her by the order of the raiders." This was confirmed by Michael Cordial: "The house was surrounded and all women folk were removed from the scene." Ethel falsely swore how some of the IRA firing squad used shotguns. As she did not witness the execution this was mere speculation which was disproved by the medical evidence. Dr Woods gave evidence into how the wounds were caused by revolver or rifle bullets.

The execution offered an ideal opportunity to exploit the perceived bloodthirstiness of Republicans. A Dublin Castle propaganda article was produced which alleged the IRA looted the house while rehasing an allegation by Ethel Pearson about 'filthy muddy water' apparently given to her mother when 'plenty of clean water was obtainable.' It is unknown if the article, dated 9 July 1921, was ever published as it seems the intervention of the Truce consigned the horror story to cold storage.

The article was twisted for maximum emotional outrage to demoralise Republicans. It included macabre details of the IRA entertaining themselves by playing 'ragtime music' on a piano and 'violins while the execution was carried out. This propaganda strategy was known within Dublin Castle parlance as 'verisimilitude,' whereby stories would have the appearance of truth. The lies in the propaganda document were partly based on the deception of Susan Matilda and Ethel Pearson. Significantly, some elements of truth surfaced. In a telling slip the women were reported to have been 'placed on a little hill just outside the back of the house.' This was the grove, further underlining how the Pearson women were not in a position to witness the execution.



Motive for the Execution: The road where members of 'C' Company, Kinnity, were engaged in a road block operation by felling a tree. The three eldest Pearson brothers attempted to kill Volunteers by firing with shotguns. Two Volunteers were wounded, one of whom received a serious stomach injury. Both the RIC and IRA were firm and unequivocal on the motive for the execution.



The scene of the execution. Richard and Abraham Pearson were lined up against the inside wall to the left of the main archway. The execution was botched with the IRA firing squad failing to administer a coup de grace.



Michael Cordial and Peter Lyons, members of the Offaly Hurling Junior team which won the Leinster Junior Title in 1915. The Cordial brothers were renowned for their hurling skill in Offaly and New York. There was a crossover of membership between the GAA and IRA. To what extent this applied to Offaly requires further research.

a number of Volunteers surrounded the Pearson's house. Other Volunteers went to where Richard and Abraham were working in a hay field about thirty yards away. The IRA ordered the two brothers to put up their hands and go up to the house. They were taken to a yard at the back of the house, told of the execution order, and then shot by the firing squad.

The ASU botched the execution and did not carry out a coup de grace by finishing the two brothers off with head shots. The Offaly IRA had limited experience in shootings and their training was minimal. They were not battle hardened veterans. Almost two weeks previously, the 2nd Battalion (Cloghan) IRA bungled the shooting of an informer. Three Volunteers armed with two rifles and a shotgun were lying in wait to kill the chief clerk at Perry's mills in Belmont. The Volunteer armed with the shotgun was overly uptight and fired prematurely when the target was over sixty yards away. This lapse in military discipline enabled the fortunate man, an ex-soldier, to escape with his life.

The Offaly IRA preferred to specialise in low risk sabotage. Their activities were praised by An tOglach, the IRA journal. The Offaly IRA blamed the flat countryside and the perceived poor terrain for their lack of success in ambushes. This was more of an excuse than a valid reason. There was a chronic lack of decisive leadership which had a debilitating affect on operations.

The No. 2 Brigade's military deficiencies were noted by Michael McCormack, O/C 3rd Southern Division. In a correspondence with GHQ, McCormack observed: "Their sniping is poor, as you will doubtlessly have noticed & consequently the enemy have adapted an attitude of contempt for the Brigade in general." McCormack expressed disappointment how IRA training camps could not be more elaborate due to the absence of "good officer material." The inadequate educational background of many of the IRA officers hampered aspects of the training regime. Volunteers who attended a training camp during the Truce were reported to be "very slack in any military knowledge."

At 6.55 p.m., while leaving the dispensary in Kinnity, Dr Frederick W. Woods was told the two Pearson brothers had been shot. Dr Woods immediately proceeded to Coolacree on a bicycle. On arrival at 7.30 p.m. he saw Richard Pearson lying on a mattress in a field at the back of the house. By this stage Richard lost a considerable amount of blood. Had medical assistance arrived sooner the lives of the two brothers may have been saved. Richard received superficial wounds to the left shoulder, a deep wound in the right groin and right buttock. There were also wounds to the left lower leg of a superficial nature and about six wounds to the back. Dr Woods dressed the wounds antiseptically. After attending to Abraham, Dr Woods returned to Kinnity at about 8.45 p.m. At 10.45 p.m. the RIC came to the doctor's house.

He again left for Coolacree. By the time the doctor arrived Richard was already dead. The cause of death was shock and haemorrhage. On examining the body again Dr Woods found a dangerous wound he had not previously discovered. Abraham was removed to Crinkle Barracks in Birr. He had extensive wounds to the left cheek, left shoulder, left thigh and the lower left leg. He was also wounded in the abdomen and the lower part of the spinal column was fractured. At 6 a.m. the next morning Abraham died from 'shock due to gunshot wounds.' The remains were interred at the family place at Ballacolla in Co. Laois.

The Pearson episode was tragic. However, the manner of their deaths was no less traumatic than many members of the Crown forces and IRA who died during this time. On 21 September 1920 RIC Sergeant Denis McGuire, 44, was shot through the right eye by an IRA sniper at Ferbane. He died

of his wounds in the County Infirmary eight days later leaving a widow and six children. Liam Dignam, 23, O/C 1st Battalion (Clara), No. 2 Brigade was wounded by the Black and Tans in Clara on 25 October 1920. Dignam, who was unarmed, was shot in the back, above the right kidney, leaving a large wound while trying to escape with his companions into a house. He fell at a door step writhing in agony. Removed to the County Infirmary he succumbed to his wounds on 21 March 1921.

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