

In the second of a two part series local historian PHILIP MCCONWAY looks at the execution of two Offaly IRA Volunteers and a Leix IRA Volunteer. This article is based on research related to Offaly and the Civil War executions published in the recent Offaly Historical and Archaeological Society (OHAS) annual journal *Offaly Heritage*. The journal is available at the OHAS Research Centre at Bury Quay for 20 (15 to OHAS members).

The Civil War In Offaly

PART TWO

The Execution Of Offaly IRA Volunteers Joseph Byrne And Patrick Geraghty

JOSEPH BYRNE from Cruith, Daingean and Rochfordbridge native Patrick Geraghty were executed in Portlaoise on 27 January 1923. Byrne was sentenced to death for allegedly possessing a Webley revolver while Geraghty was alleged to have had an automatic pistol at Croghan on 10 November 1922. Byrne, 25, was an Adjutant in the 3rd Battalion (Tyrrellspass), Offaly No. 1 Brigade. Geraghty, 33, was O/C of the same Battalion. Republicans were adamant that both men were unarmed when captured and that they faced trumped up charges. According to the Midland Tribune Geraghty fired on Free State troops and a brisk exchange of rifle fire took place. The Offaly Independent reported Free State troops surrounding a farm house where there was a fierce exchange of shots. Byrne apparently surrendered while Geraghty escaped and took cover in a field of turnips beside the house, where he blazed away at the troops with a 'Peter-the-Painter' automatic pistol. Whatever the case against Geraghty, it was generally believed that Byrne was innocent of the charge against him. Thomas Dunne of Offaly Co. Council stated Byrne was unjustly executed as he had 'no arms at the time of his arrest.' Byrne's family were one of the early vanguards of the Irish Volunteers in their local area. It was a mark of the high esteem he was held and an indication of how popular he was that prayers were asked for the happy repose of his soul at all the Masses at Daingean on the Sunday following his execution. This was at a time of acute Catholic Church hostility towards the IRA.

Betrayed by an Informer
Byrne, Geraghty and another IRA Volunteer, who managed to escape, were staying in a safe house at Croghan belonging to a relation of Byrne. A local informer, a young boy, betrayed them to Free State forces in Tullamore. In his

final letter Byrne forgave his enemies:

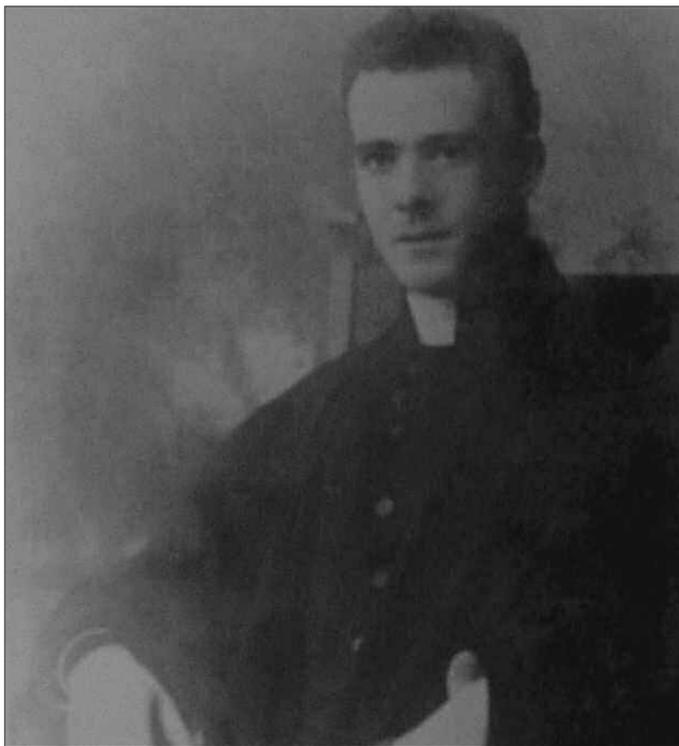
I forgive everyone. I don't bear malice to any of the men that are going to execute [me]. I will pray for them. O[h] I am so happy Paddy and myself are going to heaven for anyhow the world is but empty and what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul...

Geraghty implored his IRA comrades not to retaliate: 'Let no one be injured for my death it is not my wishes.' Morale within the IRA plummeted after the executions of Byrne and Geraghty. There was a 'great shock' within the Offaly No. 1 Brigade's 3rd Battalion over the loss of two senior leaders. While Geraghty was 'shot out and out,' Byrne had to be shot a second time as the first volley of shots was not fatal. He stumbled and fell, got up, and was on his knees crying for his mother when at point-blank range he was shot in the back of the head.

Kevin O'Higgins, Leix-Offaly TD and Minister for Home Affairs

Kevin O'Higgins, Minister for Home Affairs, initially expressed doubts over the execution policy but later became one of its most resolute supporters. He demanded a greater geographical distribution of executions as it was thought executions confined to Dublin did not have the desired local impact. O'Higgins insisted 'there should be executions in every county' because 'local executions would tend considerably to shorten the struggle.' O'Higgins' volatile personality did much to deepen the raw enmities and further polarise the country. Byrne and Geraghty were victims of the Free State's policy to provide local examples to act as a bloody deterrent to stem further IRA resistance in Offaly. The executions may have been effective in terrorising the Offaly IRA. Before the execution of Byrne and Geraghty the IRA killed five Free State soldiers but only two in the aftermath. The Offaly IRA burned a number of big houses as a reprisal for the executions.

Byrne and Geraghty may



Fr Thomas Burbage, inveterate Republican and one of the few priests to openly denounce Free State executions. Source: Kearney, John, Killeigh and Geashill: a pictorial record (Naas, 1990)



Kevin O'Higgins, Leix-Offaly TD and Minister for Home Affairs. He wanted a greater geographical distribution of executions. Source: Tim Pat Coogan and George Morrison, *The Irish Civil War* (London, 2005 edn), p. 254.

never have been executed were it not for the incessant pressure from central authority in Dublin who foisted the decision on Free State Army commanders operating at a local level. Free State political leaders were determined that senior local army officers would also be implicated in executions thereby shifting some of the blame away from them. A blind eye was often turned by local Free State Army officers when former IRA comrades were caught in arms. There was a selective approach and lack of consistency when it came to implementing the draconian policy of executions. Some IRA Volunteers captured with arms and ammunition were not executed. The senior IRA rank of Byrne and Geraghty sealed their fate. It was who they were not what they did that singled them out for execution.

Local Free State Army Restraint

The number of executions would certainly have been higher had not the restraint and humanitarian concern of Free State commander for south Offaly Joseph Connolly intervened to save the lives of former comrades. Three IRA Volunteers 'owed their lives to Joseph Connolly.' Connolly was arguably the best and most effective Offaly IRA leader during the War of Independence. A similar case of intervention arose with Kibbegan native James McGuinness, a senior Free State Army commander employed in the offices of the Adjutant-General in Dublin. McGuinness, the eldest brother of leading Offaly IRA stalwart Séan, was unmasked as an IRA mole when a prominent IRA officer in Dublin was captured with incriminating documents. McGuinness was arrested, court-martialled and sentenced to death. An influential Free State Army officer at GHQ, believed to be related to Joseph Byrne, intervened to have the sentence commuted to penal servitude. While imprisoned in Portobello barracks McGuinness received a severe beating. From 1923 to his death in 1937, aged 44, he suffered from poor health.

The Execution of Thomas Gibson
In a decision that would cost him his life Thomas Gibson, a Free State Army corporal and a native of Bogtown Lane in the Cloneygowan townland near Geashill, deserted to join the Leix IRA. On 19 November 1922 Gibson left

Portlaoise barracks while on active service and handed over five rifles and a grenade to the IRA. On 10 January 1923 he was arrested with two prominent IRA Volunteers in Leix while asleep in a safe house. He was executed for treachery in Portlaoise on 26 February 1923. The Free State was as merciless with their own troops as they were with the IRA. Five Free State soldiers were executed in Dublin on 8 January 1923. They were accused of treachery for assisting the IRA in an attack on Free State troops at Leixlip.

Fr Thomas Burbage: Condemning Executions

Fr Thomas Burbage, C.C. Geashill, lambasted Free State executions saying 'it was a shame for people to allow such things to be done.' He stated Gibson was 'unbalanced in mind, and that his mother had been a patient in Maryboro [Portlaoise] Lunatic Asylum.' The execution 'shocked and disgusted everyone who knew him.' Fr Burbage condemned the policy of executions as 'abominable' as 'it was altogether opposed to the traditions of our people - that even Cromwell's soldiers were not executed when they fell into the hands of the Irish troops.' According to Fr Burbage 'practically the entire parish' had signed 'a solemn protest' against the executions, even the protest against the threat of conscription in 1918 was not 'nearly so general.' Fr Burbage believed the policy of executions did 'incalculable harm' to any prospect of peace: '...the executions had

killed that [peace] movement and had produced such an atmosphere of distrust and bitterness that there was not the slightest hope of reviving it.'

Fr Burbage's staunch Republicanism and implacable opposition to the Free State was unusual. Most of the Catholic Church, especially its hierarchy, was relentless in its bitter denunciation of the IRA whose members they excommunicated. It was a rarity for priests such as Fr Burbage to have the courage of their convictions and denounce the ferocity of Free State violence. While the Church fulminated over the IRA it was often oblivious to the viciousness of the Free State.

Conclusion

Frank Aiken, IRA Chief of Staff, later conceded that the policy of executions played a key role in the IRA ceasefire on 30 April 1923 which ended the Civil War. The executions did not bring any electoral benefits for Cumann na nGaedheal in Leix-Offaly, only serving to rekindle public sympathy for Republicans and forever blackened the reputation of the Free State. On a national level the nine constituencies that were contested in the 1922 and 1923 elections Republicans increased their mandate in all but one in 1923. Two IRA leaders, Séan McGuinness and Laurence Brady, were elected in Leix-Offaly. The election result was a testament to the growing alienation which many people in the midlands felt towards the Free State.

"We have loved him in life, let us not forget him in death."—St. Ambrose.

Immaculate Heart of Mary pray for us—100 days, each time.

Queen of the Most Holy Rosary pray for us—100 days, each time.

Sacred Heart of Jesus. HAVE MERCY ON THE SOUL OF

Adjutant Joseph A. Byrne,
Cruith, Dangan,
3rd Battalion, No. 1 North Offaly Brigade,
Irish Republican Army,
Who was Executed at Maryborough,
on the 27th JANUARY, 1923,
AGED 25 YEARS.
beannaict 'Dé le n-a anam.

MERCIFUL JESUS! let one drop of that Precious Blood which flowed from Thy Wounds be applied to the soul of Thy servant, JOSEPH, if he is still detained in Purgatory, since it was shed for him, so let it solace, comfort and release him. Amen.



Joseph Byrne, Adjutant, 3rd Battalion (Tyrrellspass), Offaly No. 1 Brigade IRA, from Cruith, Daingean. Executed in Portlaoise 27 January 1923. Courtesy: Oliver Dunne



Dying for the Irish Republic. Headstone over Thomas Gibson's grave, Raheen Cemetery, Cloneygowan. In a decision which would cost him his life Gibson deserted the Free State Army to join the Leix IRA. Source: Philip McConway



Patrick Geraghty, O/C 3rd Battalion (Tyrrellspass), Offaly No. 1 Brigade IRA, and a native of Oldtown, Rochfordbridge. Executed in Portlaoise 27 January 1923. Courtesy: Oliver Dunne.