

MARTIN O'DWYER'S RECOLLECTIONS

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An article, authored by us, was published by the *Limerick Leader* over two issues of the newspaper, the first being on Saturday, December 30th, 1995. The second part appeared on Saturday, January 13th, 1996. Our writing was based upon segments of a recording that we made of the recollections by Martin O'Dwyer of Herbertstown of the events that unfolded at the Sinn Fein dance held at Caherguillamore House on St Stephen's night, 1920 and the aftermath of those events. Our recording was made in December 1972, two years before Martin's death. In this single account, we have drawn together the two publications by the *Limerick Leader*.

The events that occurred at Caherguillamore on 26th/27th December 1920 are the subject of detailed accounts to be found elsewhere in this book. Consequently, we avoid repetition except where essential to Martin's story. The personal recollections of Martin, who attended the dance, are informative and instructive. Martin, an active Volunteer in Ireland's fight for Independence, was "on-the-run" from Crown forces at the time.

Our account of his recollections extends to his time in prison in England until his eventual release and return to his beloved Ireland and Herbertstown, where he lived out a remarkable life.

Events at Caherguillamore House and their Aftermath

"At the end of a difficult year for the Volunteers, someone had the idea of holding a dance in the mansion of the absentee Caherguillamore landlord.

"I remember going over in a horse and trap. It was a beautiful night, almost as bright as day. There were several hundred there, and the dance was going on fine, but after a while there was some whisper going through that the Black-and-Tans were coming, but I couldn't see any foundation for it.

"Bob Ryan – who was to become a TD after – came to me and said: 'You're on the run. Better escape while there is time'. We were just outside the back door when up went the Verey lights. The house was surrounded. It was all confusion; shots rang out, and we heard glass breaking. Bob Ryan was outside, and the military put him up against the wall and fired point-blank at him, breaking his shoulder.

“We were all crowded into a reception room. The next thing the hall door was smashed in and the military came in yelling: ‘Hands up!’ They were raging because one of their men was killed by our sentries. I thought they’d shoot because of their reputation, and I told the lads to say an Act of Contrition – no good shouting for mercy.

“I was watching the man [enemy] in front of me, and my mind was working: what chance would I have if the bullet went through me? There was foam flying out of his mouth. He raged and rose up from the ground... and still the finger was on the trigger and never pulled.

“I since had a great admiration for the discipline of the British army. One of our lads couldn’t have done that. The trigger would have gone long ago.

“The next thing we heard was an order to have the girls removed. That didn’t look good. Two of our young lads got coats from the women and put them on and went up with the women. Later the forces brought two ladies to check the women prisoners. They went up and after a while they shouted down: ‘two feckers here!’ and down came the two lads, badly beaten, back into our crowd.

“We were ordered out of the reception room, and I happened to be first. The moment I was outside in the hall I got a crack on the back of the head from a rifle... I hurried on as quick as I could up the hallway, and as I burst into the other room, I got another crack that knocked me down.

“The rest came after me and they all getting hit as they were coming in. I was landed before a fellow at a table. He asked me my name, and as I was on the run, I said it was Pat Welsh.

“Finally, they ordered us to go across the passageway, and just as I was going into the dance room, a fellow came and struck me with a rifle... the bayonet knob went right into my head... they told me after I had one of the worst wounds there. A doctor was on the run too, and they gave him a terrible beating, but after they sent him around to tie up bandages.

“We were thrown in there on top of one another, and I dozed with two or three lying on my legs. At dawn, they called us out in batches of ten to the lorries and with armoured cars in front and behind, we were driven to the military barracks just outside Limerick. An officer came out and called each name. When he called Pat Welsh, and I got down, I was badly able to walk on account of my legs were all cramped and I heard one of the lads saying – ‘That isn’t Pat Welsh at all, it’s Pat Welsh he called’.

“So when I went in, they asked me my name, and I said: ‘I gave the wrong name last night. My name is O’Dwyer’. So they made enquiries and said: ‘Are you Martin Dwyer who was on the run?’ And I said I was. They took us in, and we were all cut and bleeding. Inside, there were a couple of big fires and with the heat, the smell of the blood was terrible... We were there for three days and were interrogated by the Black-and-Tans, who beat and kicked us, but they were tormented as we gave them no information.

“Next, we were sent to the regular prison in Limerick. We were put into cells, four or five in each. It was so quiet in comparison. Even the soldiers on guard were very friendly. They didn't like the job nor the Black-and-Tans. They told us one morning there were two or three of them [*Tans*] killed in County Clare, and they were glad of it.

“It wasn't usual for us to recognise their [*British*] courts but there was a problem. We got transcripts of the evidence, and they said Bob Ryan was armed when they shot him. It was martial law that night, and there was a great danger they might shoot him as an example. We'd be risking his life if we didn't give evidence, so I said I'd testify. I was called, and there was a very nice gentleman who was president of the court martial. I told what happened, that Bob Ryan had no arms or anything. Finally he said, ‘What about yourself?’ I said I had nothing to say. That settled that anyway.

“Those prisoners that they weren't sure were IRA were tried and sentenced to three or six months in detention camps, like Ballykinder. We were kept back for a general court-martial. We were expecting we'd get six months, too. But the morning the sentence was read out, it was ten years penal servitude for unlawful assembly.”

Prison and Eventual Freedom

“It was ten years' penal servitude, reduced to five, so that was that then, we had to do it. One fellow started to kick up a row, but ‘There's one day down anyway,’ says I.

“Several mornings later, without warning, we were carried down to the docks [*Limerick*] and put on a disused minesweeper. We got very sick, all of us. We were lying on the iron bottom of the vessel. We went into Cork and were unloaded onto the deck of an old ship in the bay. It was a January morning [1921], and there was a terrible breeze. We were there for the whole day until they came and gave us some sandwiches and a kind of tea, but I got very sick anyway.

“But, finally, we went across to the south of England. I used to be up on the deck during the daytime admiring the scenery. We arrived in the evening in Portland. There was a bay and a big high hill and up there the prison was. We were issued prison clothes, and we first had a month of solitary confinement. You'd get books to read, and I started to write a lot of verses.”

On January 23rd, 1921, Martin O'Dwyer was able to write his first letter home to his widowed mother, alone on the farm in Herbertstown: *Portland Prison, Saturday evening. Dear mother, Just a line to let you know that I arrived all right in England. We were seasick the first night, but we soon got over it. Don't be a bit uneasy as I am in good health and spirits, and we are very well treated here. I may not be allowed to write for some time again, but I will do so at the first chance. In the meantime, I ask you to take care of yourself so that you will be there when I come home again. Above all don't forget what you promised and all will be right. If you knew how well off I am you would not be troubled seeing the way I would be now at home. Uncle Tom [Purcell] said it would be better for you to sell the cows, but I was thinking that you would be more lonely if you had no business going on. I got Mary Hickey's letter*

and was glad she was with you. Don't forget we will be soon together again and don't forget what you promised. Martin.

“After the month of confinement we were led out for work, towards the flag quarries of Portland, and we had heard what a terrible place it was. But we were taken to a smith's forge instead, and our warder was an old man married to an Irish woman, and he was very sympathetic and honest. Says he ‘I'm a bad warder, but I'm a good watchdog.’

“I got a kind of general job. We all got on nicely. You'd get porridge and tea in the morning. At dinner we'd get what we called mystery

soup: we'd put in a spoon and if you were lucky you might get a bit of meat. Another day you'd only get beans. They were very nice. I never had them as good since. The day you'd get them, you'd feel a lot stronger.

“There were a lot of Dublin IRA men there and a man named Barton was one of the leaders, and we were ordered to go on strike for political prisoner status. That morning we threw off our hats and said we were working no more. The old warder was actually crying, saying: ‘they'll finish you now . . . there'll be no chance for Paddys.’

“We were brought up in the yard, and another warder addressed us, saying it was mutiny and there would be floggings the next weekend and all. We were put on trial and got thirty days of confinement on bread and water. 'Twas three days very hungry, then three better days, another three bad days. There was one chap, and he was very delicate and they made out he wasn't able for the shortage of food. They gave him 42 days in prison, and he was let out very sick and he died after from the effects of it. James Moloney was his name.

“All the time, there was talk of a settlement. But they decided to move us to Dartmoor in June. We were told we were to put on our own clothes again, and we were delighted, but when we went down to where the clothes were, a damp old place, they were wringing wet. It's a wonder we didn't get our death. They put us on a boat and an Irish sailor on board gave the lads a lot of cigarettes, but they got sick from the smoke.

“Dartmoor was different to Portland. It was a very gloomy old place. Portland was a model prison and very clean. It was over the sea and, as a result, you were very healthy



Martin O'Dwyer, Chairman of Limerick County Council.

and had a great appetite. But Dartmoor was very dark and desolate and very cold.

“The truce came along in June or July, and we were expecting we'd be carried away any day. It was like a bird that would be brought out of a cage and put back. We were fairly sick of it. About the second morning we were there [Dartmoor], we heard about the settlement, the Treaty was passed, and we didn't approve of it at all. I know I didn't anyway. The warder was telling me about it, and I said ‘Was there an Oath in it?’, ‘There was’ says he. ‘An Oath to the King?’ says I. ‘Yes’ says he. ‘Ah, they were only agitators after all.’

“Finally, in January [1922], we were released. We were so tired of being disappointed so often that we didn't feel one bit cheerful coming out. I certainly wasn't. But we went to Portsmouth where people met and entertained us and we got a shave. I remember in the Bible when the Israelite people were imprisoned by the Philistines, and their beards were cut off, and the first thing they did when they got out was to hide themselves until their beards grew again. The first thing we did was get a shave.

“So we came across anyway at night, and the Dublin people insisted we all stop in Dublin to see some entertainment in a hall. But Dublin was very sad, very quiet and dismal. There was no work, no anything. They were all afraid of this Treaty business. I suppose it was pre-Civil War. One man ran up to us in a great fright to know was his son with us and we consoled him, there were other batches coming after. There were, of course. So we came home to Limerick, and there was a great night, a great coming home and we were delighted.”

Life Afterwards

Martin O'Dwyer did not participate in the Civil War. He continued farming and had a long and notable public career: as a Senator (for twelve years between 1938 and 1961), Chairman of Limerick County Council and co-founder and Chairman of Golden Vale. He made a major contribution to the co-operative movement and was responsible for many advances made over the years. He died in 1974 at the age of 88 and is interred at the same Grange Churchyard as his five fellow Volunteers, who were killed at Caherguillamore in December 1920. The monument to their ultimate sacrifice was restored in recent years. The names of the five Volunteers who died are recorded elsewhere in this book.

Poetry

Martin O'Dwyer wrote a lot of verses while in prison. The following is his first poem about Caherguillamore, called “*Shall We Forget*”:

*Shall we forget though the grave and the prison,
Darkly between us their shadows have thrown.*

*Shall we forget them who nobly arisen,
Stood on the ramparts of death all alone.
Fearless and few when the signals red glaring,
Flashed over Guillamore's valley and wood.
Fearless and few but the fate and the daring,
Of Eire's great soul in each bosom they stood.*

*Shall we forget the foes who beset them,
Well would have conquered the green hills of
Grange.
Be as low as her heroes when we shall forget them,
Our pride and our glory through storm and
change.
No, number their names for though Eire has many,
On her red roll of honour they too in the breath
Of the future will live from the youngest of any,
To him who was leader in life and in death.*



Martin O'Dwyer in his later years.

*Oh, weep not for him though he be silent forever,
His voice in the home of the land of his birth.
For he died as he would for his country and never
Was a spirit so beautiful formed on our earth.
Too fearless and fiery too noble and great
To live in the chains of a tyrant at ease.
Too true and unselfish, too simple and straight,
To rule in the calm hour of freedom and peace.
Oh, his spirit was set for the dread hour of battle,
As a star that illumines as it falls from the sky.
So its mission was there
mid the thunder's deep rattle,
To flash o'er the pathway
to freedom and die.*