

## **The Death of Michael O’Neill, the Dunmanway Killings and their impact on the West Cork IRA and the local Protestant population by Conor Brennan**

The ‘Dunmanway Killings’ were a series of attacks, ambushes and assassinations on mostly Protestant civilians in west Cork over three days in late April 1922. These events proved hugely controversial and their impact on the Protestant community in these areas was monumental. The motivation for these actions has been ferociously contested by various historians over the last century. This essay will investigate the individuals involved and attempt to evaluate the conflicting accounts amid the tense climate that existed in between the signing of the Anglo-Irish treaty and the outbreak of the Civil War.

The Irish War of Independence ended with a truce between the British forces and the IRA on 11<sup>th</sup> July 1921. In December, the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed, which ended British rule in most of Ireland, established Northern Ireland as part of Britain, and created the Irish Free State in the south. The Treaty was contentious when it returned to the Dáil, with debates over the oath of allegiance to the king, the Free State’s dominion status and partition. The Dáil and the IRA split between those who supported the treaty and those opposed. Anti-Treaty politicians exited the Dáil and refused to recognise the Provisional Government led by Michael Collins. In West Cork, the local IRA was almost unanimously anti-Treaty. National tensions rose when anti-Treaty IRA members occupied the Four Courts in April 1922.<sup>1</sup>

My great-granduncle Michael O’Neill was a senior member in the Kilbriain IRA, in “the epicentre of the War of Independence in West Cork”. O’Neill’s family was central to the operations of the Kilbriain IRA, with the whole family involved in the republican movement. They regularly provided food and shelter for Volunteers and Michael’s sister Mary led the local Cumann na mBan branch and nursed Tom Barry following the Kilmichael ambush. His brother Denis “Sonny” O’Neill has been suspected of Michael Collins’ assassination in 1922.<sup>2</sup>

Michael O’Neill had been interned twice during the War of Independence and following his second release he was appointed second-in-command to Tom Hales. He was held in high esteem by Hales and other members of the local IRA, described as “grand chivalrous warrior” by Michael O’Donoghue, Engineer Officer in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion.<sup>3</sup> During the Truce period, O’Neill became acting Officer Commanding the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cork Brigade while Hales was in Dublin with leading IRA officers, negotiating an agreement to prevent civil war after the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty.

Thomas Hornibrook, a former magistrate, Protestant, and staunch unionist also lived in West Cork. His nephew, Herbert Woods, a former Captain who was awarded two medals for bravery for his service during the First World War, was living with Hornibrook and Hornibrook’s son Samuel in Ballygroman House, near Ballincollig. “All comings and goings at the Hornibrook house were being observed” and reported to the IRA up to their deaths, and the Hornibrooks were subjected to some intimidation, “possibly related to their open loyalty to the empire”, leading to an IRA guard being placed on the house in late 1921.<sup>4</sup> Historian Meda Ryan claims that the family were “extremely anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Keane, Barry, *Massacre in West Cork: the Dunmanway and Ballygroman Killings*, Mercier Press, 2014; p122

<sup>2</sup> Collins, Stephen and McGreevy, Ronan, 2014, ‘Gunman believed to have killed Michael Collins was granted military pension’, *The Irish Times*, October 3<sup>rd</sup>;

<sup>3</sup> *Bureau of Military History, Witness Statement by Michael V O’Donoghue, Engineer Cork 1 Brigade IRA*, Ref #: 1741, P227

<sup>4</sup>Keane, 2014; p188

republican and in regular contact with the Essex [Regiment] in Bandon”, but there is no evidence that the Hornibrooks were informers.<sup>5</sup>

At around 1:30 a.m. on Wednesday 26 April 1922, during the Truce period, Michael O’Neill led a group of IRA men consisting of Stephen O’Neill (no relation), Charlie O’Donoghue and Michael Hurley to Ballygroman House. They knocked on the door claiming to be on “official business”, but these orders were never disclosed. After about 15 minutes, someone opened a window asking who was there. The group answered that they “had business” with Mr Hornibrook. The door was not opened and after another 15 minutes, Michael found an open window. Along with Stephen O’Neill and Charlie O’Donoghue, he climbed in holding a torch. As they climbed the stairs, Michael was shot in the chest, 2 inches below the collarbone, without warning. Michael was carried out of the house by his team, but he died on the side of the road about 600 metres from Ballygroman House. The reason the men were there is unknown. Different sources claim the men were looking for help for a broken motor, were looking for Edward Woods (Thomas’ son-in-law and alleged spy)<sup>6</sup>, or believed the Hornibrooks were part of a “loyalist conspiracy”.<sup>7</sup>

Later that morning, O’Donoghue returned to the house with “four military men”, who have never been identified. According to the Hornibrooks’ maid, Margaret Cronin, the house was “laid siege” for two and a half hours and was “riddled with bullets”. Woods, who admitted to firing the shot that killed O’Neill, was arrested along with Thomas and Samuel Hornibrook.<sup>8</sup> The next day, the coroner’s jury in Bandon found Woods guilty of murder and the Hornibrooks guilty by association. Tadh O’Sullivan, quartermaster of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cork Brigade, claimed to have sent O’Neill and his team to the house on unspecified official business, and since the Bandon IRA was the legal authority at the time, they ruled that if its members were there on official business, they should have been allowed in. Michael O’Neill’s body was taken to the church on the same day. His funeral on Friday 28 April was a major military ceremony through Bandon and he was buried in Kilbrittain.

What happened to the Hornibrooks and Herbert Woods is not known, although all theories and rumours agree that they were tried and killed. Their bodies have never been found. Peter Hart wrote that O’Donoghue returned to Ballygroman with rope, implying that someone was going to be “tied up or hanged”, but the only evidence for this is an anonymous interview and local folklore.<sup>9</sup> Another rumour, appearing in the Cork Hollybough in 2002, states that the men were tortured “before being taken to a secret location” where they were executed.<sup>10</sup> This source is also disputed as it claims that Thomas Hornibrook’s wife and daughter were allowed to go free, when in fact Hornibrook was a widower and his daughter Matilda was not in the house at the time.<sup>11</sup> Another rumour claims that the men were taken to Newcestown, made to dig their own graves and were axed into the graves before being dismembered<sup>12</sup>. Another claims that there was “a mêlée” as O’Donoghue arrested the men, who were then court-martialled, held in Templemartin and executed by shooting. This source claims the bodies were buried in the locality. There is no way of knowing if any of these stories are true, as they

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<sup>5</sup> Keane, 2014, p120

<sup>6</sup> *Bureau of Military History, Witness Statement by Michael V O’Donoghue, Engineer Cork 1 Brigade IRA*, Ref #: 1741, P227

<sup>7</sup> Hart, Peter, *The I.R.A. and its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork 1916-23*, Oxford University Press, 1998, P280

<sup>8</sup> Keane, 2014, p122

<sup>9</sup> Hart, 1998, p279

<sup>10</sup> Kearney, R.D., *'A time of revenge, a time of tragedy'* Cork Hollybough, 2002, Page 64.

<sup>11</sup> Keane, 2014, p124

<sup>12</sup> Keane, 2014, p125

are based on local oral history and there are no verifiable documents to back them up. The limited evidence available suggests that the killings of the Hornibrooks and Herbert Woods was a straightforward revenge killing.

Also on 26<sup>th</sup> April, three British intelligence officers, who claimed to be on a fishing trip, were arrested by the IRA in Macroom after suspicions were raised and when the IRA investigated, no fishing equipment was found. The three officers were killed sometime between the 26<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> April, along with their driver, and buried at Clondrohid. It has been suggested that they were sent to investigate the arrests of the Hornibrooks and Herbert Woods that morning, and that information taken from these officers led to the identification of those killed in the next three days as informers.<sup>13</sup> There is no direct evidence for this and the arrest of these officers may have been a coincidence.

From 26<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> April, there were widespread attacks on local loyalists in the surrounding area, the motives of which are widely debated. Ten Protestants were killed in West Cork and one was shot in the leg and seriously injured, and at least thirty men were targeted in total.<sup>14</sup> On the first night, 26-27<sup>th</sup> April, three were killed on their doorsteps in Dunmanway. Local solicitor and land agent Francis Fitzmaurice was shot at 12:15 a.m.; chemist David Gray at 1 a.m.; and retired draper James Buttimer at 1:20 a.m. Gray's wife claimed the killers called him a "Free Stater" during the attack.<sup>15</sup>

On the next night, seven more were killed. Neighbours John Chinnery and Robert Howe were shot in Castletown-Kinneigh at some time between 10:30 p.m. and 1:30 a.m. Howe's wife said he was attacked after refusing to harness a horse for the men and Chinnery was shot while harnessing a horse for the raiders.<sup>16</sup>

In Ballineen, 16-year-old Alexander Gerald McKinley, in bed, was shot three times in the back of the head after his aunt was taken out of the house at 1:30 a.m. Hart claims he was a "perceived friend of the police".<sup>17</sup>

At Caher, farmer John Buttimer and his employee James Greenfield were shot at 2 a.m. John's wife Frances confronted and tried to stop the attacker before he pushed past her to shoot the two men upstairs.<sup>18</sup>

In Murragh, Rev. Ralph Harbord was shot in the leg, but he survived. In Clonakilty, 16-year-old Robert Nagle was killed after 11 p.m. in place of his father Tom, who was the caretaker of the local Masonic Hall, which was burned on the same night. Nagle's mother later said one of the two killers was drunk.<sup>19</sup>

In Killowen on the next night, John Bradfield, who couldn't walk without crutches, was killed at 11 p.m. in place of his brother William, who allegedly passed information to the military during the War of Independence.<sup>20</sup>

More than thirty men of both Catholic and Protestant faith were targeted over these three days, but the ones killed were all Protestant. Historians have speculated on the killers' motives. Shortly after the massacre, local people thought it was a response to the recent Belfast "pogroms" or was in retaliation for Michael O'Neill's death, and it was generally accepted that the killings were a stain on the West

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<sup>13</sup> Keane, 2014, p174-175

<sup>14</sup> Keane, 2014, p143-144

<sup>15</sup> Keane, 2014, p144-145

<sup>16</sup> Keane, 2014, p144-145

<sup>17</sup> Hart, 1998, p274-175

<sup>18</sup> Keane, 2014, p145

<sup>19</sup> Keane, 2014, p146

<sup>20</sup> Keane, 2014, p146-147, p205

Cork IRA, “violently in conflict with the traditions and principles of the Republican Army”.<sup>21</sup> Michael O’Donoghue, O’Neill’s colleague in the IRA, said the victims were “all active members of the anti-Sinn Féin Society in West Cork and blacklisted as such in IRA Intelligence Records”, adding that although there was a “sectarian appearance”, “religious animosity” was not a factor and the massacre was a “savagely, wholesale, murderous reprisal for the murder” of O’Neill.<sup>22</sup> The identities of the killers have also not been revealed. Historians like Gerard Murphy and Barry Keane have concluded that the massacre was likely an unauthorised retaliation by a small number of the West Cork IRA, when their leaders were either dead or in Dublin debating the Treaty.

This traditional view was challenged by Peter Hart in 1998, who argued that the IRA punished and attempted to drive out Protestants because of their religion in revenge for Michael O’Neill’s death. He noted that “all but one [of the victims] were members of the Church of Ireland”, and claimed that the IRA’s belief in a loyalist plot, of which he said “there is no evidence whatsoever”, acted as “a spur to rage and hysteria”, leading to the massacre.<sup>23</sup> Hart said “sectarian antagonism” drove the massacre and that this “ethnic intolerance” was characteristic of the IRA,<sup>24</sup> declaring that “the nationalist revolution had also been a sectarian one”.<sup>25</sup> Hart’s theories were disputed by nationalist historians, but they were dismissed as “republican sympathisers” until it was shown that Hart had selectively quoted sources “central to his argument”.<sup>26</sup> The accuracy of Hart’s work has been questioned and debated, with some saying examples of elision in his work are insignificant and others saying that he built “an ahistorical argument” and that his claims about local nationalists closing ranks against Protestants were exaggerated.

Some have suggested that the killers were British agents trying to prompt a re-invasion of Ireland, although there is no evidence for this. Meda Ryan claims that the victims were all identified as informers after the IRA found an Auxiliary’s intelligence diary with a list naming them in January 1922. Ryan has not provided a copy of this list to any other historian, so this theory is also disputed. Photographs of the diary don’t identify any of the victims’ names, but two entries in the diary may indirectly refer to Robert Howe’s cousin William, a likely informer, and John Buttimer respectively, but these remains unknown.<sup>27</sup> Some witness statements do refer to the IRA having such information, but it hasn’t been verified that the victims were on any list.

It is known that a J Buttimer from Clonakilty, James Buttimer’s nephew, was named as an enemy agent in July 1921, and it has been suggested that either James or John Buttimer, or both, were killed in this man’s place. This is supported by the fact that James was an 82-year-old member of the Pro-Home Rule League, so was an unlikely target, and John’s house was awkward to get too and surrounded by other Protestant homes, so was likely targeted for a specific reason.

Some historians, including Ryan, have also disagreed with Hart’s view that there was no evidence of an Anti-Sinn Féin Society, claiming the victims of the killings were linked to it. Statements by British intelligence seem to confirm its existence, but there is no evidence that the victims were members. William Jagoe, who was targeted on 26<sup>th</sup> April, was told that he was targeted because of his alleged contributions to loyalist causes, which supports the theory that the victims were “targeted for what they did rather than their religion”.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Keane, 2014, p146-147

<sup>22</sup> *Bureau of Military History, Witness Statement by Michael V O’Donoghue, Engineer Cork 1 Brigade IRA*, Ref #: 1741, p227

<sup>23</sup> Hart, 1998, p285

<sup>24</sup> Hart, 1998, p288

<sup>25</sup> Hart, 1998, p292

<sup>26</sup> Keane, 2014, p149-150

<sup>27</sup> Keane, 2014, p158-159

<sup>28</sup> Keane, 2014, p164-165

The British Government “expressed great shock and concern” over the killings, but felt that the situation in the south had improved since the Truce and that it was the responsibility of the Free State to investigate the massacre. Hart claimed that the Provisional Government “did nothing” in response to the killings, despite their condemnation, but Keane writes that the “immediate Irish reaction was of shock and an attempt to assure Protestants of their safety”. Cork Corporation offered their “sincerest sympathies” to their “Protestant fellow countrymen” and Cork County Council condemned the killings, as did local Catholic priests and bishops. The IRA’s own response was more effective, as guards were placed on “vulnerable homes” in West Cork, and when Tom Hales and Tom Barry returned from Dublin, they regained control over the IRA. The Government promised to “secure the restoration of their homes and property” to anyone who lost them “by violence and intimidation. The Protestant Convention heard that prior to the killings, sectarian “hostility to Protestants” was “almost, if not wholly, unknown” in the south.<sup>29</sup>

The decline in the Protestant population of Cork of 43% from 1911 to 1926 has often been attributed to sectarianism and intimidation, and while this was a factor following the killings, most of this decline resulted from British military withdrawal. A Protestant flight from West Cork did occur, with over 100 people leaving the Dunmanway area for Cork for “what, they hope, will be a temporary” period. The paper later noted “large amounts of southern Protestants” went to Rosslare harbour, heading for England. The “vast majority” of native Protestants had returned or remained in West Cork by 1926. The fact that many of those accused of being members of an Anti-Sinn Féin Society, including Rev. Harbord, continued to live as “leading members of society” suggests that the Dunmanway killings were an exceptional event “rather than a systemic attempt to drive out” Protestants.

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<sup>29</sup> Keane, 2014, p187

## Bibliography

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