

# THE GRANEY AMBUSH 1922



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JAMES DURNEY

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# **The Graney Ambush 1922**



THE  
GRANEY  
AMBUSH  
1922

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## Foreword

The interpretative panel which commemorates the Graney Ambush of 1922 is the second in a series, *Telling Tales: Heritage Signage for Castledermot*, organised by the Castledermot Local History Group. Further panels will be erected around the town in the coming years covering other aspects of our parish's rich history.

In June 1922, a disagreement among republicans over the Anglo-Irish Treaty led to an eleven-month Civil War. On 24 October 1922 a confrontation took place at Graney crossroads on the road from Castledermot to Baltinglass when an anti-Treaty IRA column ambushed a pro-Treaty National Army vehicle. This resulted in the deaths of four National Army soldiers and five wounded. According to James Durney, *'This attack was the most lethal ambush of the revolutionary period in County Kildare.'* Local accounts recall that the gunshots could be heard by the workmen who were inserting a Gothic style rose fashioned window above the nave entrance in the Catholic Church of the Assumption in Castledermot.

As we commemorate the centenary of one of the most turbulent times in our recent history, I believe communities should continue to record local events from their perspective. The Graney Ambush interpretative panel will ensure that this episode in our local history does not fade away without being documented and acknowledged.

I would like to thank the following local history members for enabling this important event in Castledermot's history to be marked: Michael Dempsey (project lead), George Corrigan and Dr. Sharon

Greene. Thanks to James Durney of the Local Studies, Genealogy and Archives Department of the Kildare Library and Arts Services for the research, articles and talks that informed the text on the panel; Marc Guernon, artist and archaeologist, who created the reconstruction drawing; and Bridget Loughlin, Heritage Officer, Kildare County Council for advice and support.

We also acknowledge the financial support of the Castledermot Tidy Towns Committee, the County Kildare Decade of Commemorations Committee, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media under the Decade of Centenaries 2021-2023 initiative and Kildare County Council for allowing us to erect the panel.

Liz Whelan  
Chairperson, Castledermot Local History Group  
22 October 2022

# The Graney Ambush 1922

JAMES DURNEY

On 24 October 1922 an I.R.A. column ambushed a National Army Crossley tender at Graney crossroads on the (L4015) Castledermot to Baltinglass road in South Kildare. Three National Army soldiers were killed and five more were wounded, of whom one later died of his wounds. This well-planned and violent attack, which demonstrated the viciousness of the Civil War, was the most lethal ambush of the revolutionary period in Kildare, a county in which the level of violence before the Truce of 11 July 1921 had been low. Nine people had died violently in the years 1919-21.<sup>1</sup> The Anglo-Irish Treaty, signed on 6 December 1921, giving to twenty-six counties of Ireland ‘a measure of freedom’<sup>2</sup> immediately split the Irish republican movement. Civil War between the new Provisional Government of the Free State and anti-Treaty elements of the I.R.A. began in June 1922.<sup>3</sup>

In Kildare, and in surrounding counties like Wicklow and Carlow, the I.R.A. had only begun to be effective in the spring of 1921, when divisions, brigades and battalions were organised. These units were only beginning to act cohesively by the time the Truce was signed. With martial training continuing during the period of the Truce period, the I.R.A. was in a better military position in 1922 than it had been previously. As a result the violence in Co. Kildare increased dramatically. Forty-three people lost their lives in an eleven-month period in Co. Kildare from June 1922 to May 1923.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Durney, James. *The War of Independence in Kildare* (Cork, 2013), p.220.

2 *Freeman's Journal* 22 December 1921.

3 Durney, *The War of Independence in Kildare*, p.197.

4 Durney, James. *The Civil War in Kildare* (Cork, 2011), p.14.



## *The Ambush*

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The ambush took place at a place known as Graney Cross, a sharp bend where four roads converge. The attacking party used Richard Thorpe's house on the right hand side of the road as their main position. Mr. and Mrs. Thorpe were held in one of the cottages occupied by the anti-Treaty volunteers. Men were also positioned at Hunt's cottage at the cross, behind a low wall and at old ruins at Paddy Doyle's forge.<sup>5</sup> For about an hour before the ambush occurred people passing along the roads in the locality were held up and ordered to take cover in nearby houses. A wedding party was recorded as among those held captive, and some labourers working on the roads in the area were also held up and taken to a place of safety. All the roads had been blocked by trees and the small group of National Army soldiers was caught in a death-trap. The attackers outnumbered the National troops by over two-to-one and they fired on the Crossley tender using rifles, Lewis guns and revolvers.<sup>6</sup>

There is little doubt that the anti-Treaty men who carried out the ambush were from the locality and that the action was planned after the National Army troops were first seen immobilised on the Athy/Castledermot road sometime between 12.00 noon and 1.00 pm. The ambushers had over two hours to put their men in place.

In charge of the National Army detail were Commandant Hugh Kenny and Lieutenant Edward Nolan, both of Baltinglass, Co. Wicklow. The driver of the Crossley tender was James Hunt. Its other occupants were Sergeant John Scully, Volunteers [Privates] James Murphy, Edward Byrne, Patrick Allison, John Nolan and James Martin.<sup>7</sup> The tender with the nine soldiers had left Baltinglass around 12 noon to travel to Athy, but ran out of petrol between Castledermot and Athy. Comdt. Kenny sent one man on a bicycle with dispatches to Athy, and

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5 On 27 September 2017 the author, along with Mario Corrigan and photographer Donal Higgins, met with several local historians – Thomas and George Corrigan, George Stephenson and Sharon Greene – at Graney Cross to film and map the ambush site. Thomas Corrigan provided a hand-drawn map.

6 *Leinster Leader* 4 November 1922.

7 Comdt. Kenny and Lt. Edward Nolan are recorded in the military census return of midnight 12-13 November 1922 as being patients in the Curragh Military Hospital. Also present on the same census form are Sgt. John Scully, and Privates John Nolan and James Martin, which leads me to believe that there were nine men in total in the tender on the day of the ambush. Kenny and Ed. Nolan are also recorded on an officers' census return.

a motor brought out fuel. They decided to abandon their original trip and having refuelled, to return to Baltinglass through Castledermot. The tender stopped at the Post Office for about five minutes and then proceeded towards Baltinglass. The soldiers had spent over an hour on the roadway between Athy and Castledermot and their presence was undoubtedly noted by anti-Treaty supporters. When the National troops began their journey back to Baltinglass more than twenty republicans were already in position in and around Graney Cross waiting to ambush the unsuspecting soldiers.<sup>8</sup>

As the tender was passing Thorpe's house on the right side of the road a volley of shots was opened on it from the cottage, with no effect. A second volley quickly followed. The driver, James Hunt, was hit and he lost control of the tender, which ran up on the ditch at what was known as Cassidy's Garden between ten and fifteen yards from the cottage. Comdt. Kenny, probably sitting in the front with the driver, was thrown out of the tender to the right into the ditch where he crawled to safety. The rest of the occupants fell out onto the road on the left side. Comdt. Kenny was wounded when he attempted to return fire and crawled up the hill to Knockfield Lodge.

Lt. Edward Nolan gave this description of the ambush to the inquest the following day at the Workhouse, Carlow.

On Tuesday 24th October, I left Baltinglass about noon with Commandant Kenny, five men and the driver in a Crossley tender. We were going to Athy. Between Castledermot and Athy we ran short of petrol and the car stopped on the road. Comdt. Kenny sent one of the men with dispatches to Athy on a bicycle, and a motor brought out petrol. We then proceeded to return to Baltinglass through Castledermot. We stopped at the Post Office for about five minutes, and then proceeded towards Baltinglass. When we came to Graney Cross and as we were passing by the cottage on the right side fire was opened upon the troops from the cottage. The first volley had no effect. A second volley was fired quickly. The driver lost control of the car and it ran up on the ditch between ten and fifteen yards from the cottage. Fire was opened on all sides, from the cottage; a house at the cross; a low wall called the pound and the

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8 'Report of inquest at the Workhouse, Carlow, 25 October 1922.' Copy in Kildare Local Studies, Genealogy and Archives Department.

old ruins to the left in the field. The second volley knocked out the whole party. Three men fell out of the car on to the road dead. The others were all wounded. I was wounded myself and dropped down flat on the road and crawled along the edge of the ditch, and when I got up, about seven yards in front of the cottage, I was covered by three men with revolvers. I was lying on my back in the ditch when I was ordered to put them up, and one man took the rifle and ammunition from me. I asked him to get me a drink of water in the house opposite. He promised to do so, but did not come back. About twenty men came out from the cottage and behind the ditch. They were all armed. I recognised amongst them three men. They were all armed. I cannot tell who fired the shots that killed the three men. After this they set fire to the lorry and then marched off in the direction of Knocknacree. Most of the firing was at close range and it was impossible to escape and the roads were barricaded. The car was standing still from the time it ran into the ditch and was bending over towards the road. The fire was opened up on us suddenly and without warning and we were not called on to surrender. I did the best I could for my wounded comrades with the assistance of neighbours. We were afterwards removed to Carlow. The firing came from revolvers, rifles and bombs. While the men were lying on the road the firing was kept up.<sup>9</sup>

Hit by a deadly fusillade of bullets Privates Edward Byrne, James Murphy and Patrick Allison fell out of the lorry onto the road, where they were hit by more bullets. Pte. Edward Byrne, Bagnelstown, was hit four times and died from a wound above the heart. He was sixteen and had only joined the National Army three months previously. James Murphy, Kilkegan, Baltinglass, had been in the National Army for ten months. He was aged forty and had been shot in the shoulder. Thirty-one-year-old Patrick Allison, Harristown, Co. Kildare, was hit twice, in the head and stomach. All the rest of the troops were wounded, and, except for Lt. Nolan (who was wounded in the back and face), were seriously injured. The I.R.A. column burned the tender and took away all the arms, comprising eight rifles, except Comdt. Kenny's revolver.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Op cit, 'Report of inquest at the Workhouse, Carlow, 25 October 1922.'

<sup>10</sup> Inquest; Registration of Deaths, Baltinglass District No. 2, 22 October 1922, sourced online at [Irishgenealogy.ie;https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths\\_returns/deaths\\_1923/05050/4382736.pdf](https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths_returns/deaths_1923/05050/4382736.pdf)

After the ambushers had left, some of those who had been held up hurried off to Castledermot and Baltinglass bearing the sad news. Mrs. Hunt brought water to the injured. It was said that another local family refused to provide water to the injured.<sup>11</sup> This could be assumed from Ned Nolan's statement which said 'I asked him (one of the ambushers) to get me a drink of water in the house opposite. He promised to do so, but did not come back.' A young lady dressed the wounds of the injured soldiers before a local doctor, D. P. Kenna, arrived at the site.<sup>12</sup>

When the news of the ambush reached Baltinglass troops were immediately dispatched to the scene. Rev. T. O'Neill (parish priest of Baltinglass), and local curates, Fathers Murphy and Mahon, quickly arrived at Graney and administered the last rites of the Catholic Church to the dying and wounded men. Brigadier-General Niall MacNeill proceeded to the ambush scene from Carlow Barracks. He found one dead man, Patrick Allison, on the road, and the dead bodies of Edward Byrne and James Murphy in a house at the Cross. He said it had been impossible for the troops to escape the ambush, and maintained one of the wounded men was shot while lying on the ground.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Ambushed*

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The bodies were brought to the Carlow Workhouse, which had recently been taken over by the National Army. Mr. Richard McDonald, Coroner for County Carlow, held an inquest in the Boardroom of the Workhouse. Brig.-Gen. Niall MacNeill represented the National Army and Terence Doyle, solicitor, appeared on behalf of the military authorities. A grieving Mary Byrne, the mother of Pte. Edward Byrne, identified his body. She told the inquest:

I have seen the body of Edward Byrne, now lying in the hospital of the Workhouse. He is aged sixteen years and had been in the National Army for three months. He is my son. I last saw him alive on Thursday last. I also identify the body of Patrick Allison.

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<sup>11</sup> Local lore repeated by one of the local historians (27/9/2017), who preferred to remain unnamed.

<sup>12</sup> *Nationalist & Leinster Times* 28 October 1922.

<sup>13</sup> *Leinster Leader* 4 November 1922.



**Marching for the 50th Commemoration of the 1916 Rising — Carlow Old IRA. Not all names known. Front row L to R — Paddy Murphy, John Swan, Jack Scully, Tom Fitzpatrick; 2nd row — Mrs. Kirwan, Martin Hogan, Harry Brophy; 3rd row — Denis Hogan, Evans White; 4th row — Jim Rice, Paddy Hogan. At reer, Michael Kirwan. Photo supplied: Richard Fitzpatrick, Crossleigh.**



The Old Forge at Graney, c.1920s.  
(Photo: George Corrigan)



Pte. James Hunt, the driver of the Crossly tender, died of his injuries in the Carlow County Infirmary on 28 October 1922.  
*(Photo: Colm O'Rourke)*



Mick Woods, Russelstown Park, Pallatine, Co. Carlow, was one of the ambush party and was the man who, according to a family story, burned the National Army vehicle to make it unusable.  
*(Photo: P. J. Woods)*



In 1952 members of the Old I.R.A. unveiled a headstone and monument in honour of Thomas O'Connell. Tom Derrig T.D., gave the oration.  
*(Photo: Edenderry Historical Society)*



The leader of the Carlow A.S.U., Thomas O'Connell, was killed in a car crash at Levitstown, Maganey, on 31 August 1924.  
*(Photo: Edenderry Historical Society)*

John Murphy, Killalesh, Kiltegan, Co. Wicklow, deposed:

I have identified the dead body to the right in the hospital as that of my brother, James. He has been in the National Army for nine or ten months. He is aged about forty years.

Lt. Edward Nolan then gave his evidence of the ambush adding that at no time were they asked to surrender. As Dr. Doyle gave his medical evidence on the deaths of the soldiers, Mrs. Byrne wept uncontrollably when she heard of the terrible injuries inflicted on her young son. Brig.-Gen. MacNeill in his evidence said that it was an ambush 'absolutely impossible' to escape:

I would not attach any blame to the men for surrendering if they had got an opportunity to do so, and I believe that the firing of several volleys in succession did not gain any military advantage for the attackers and was not justified.

The coroner's report returned a verdict that the men 'were wilfully and brutally murdered by an ambush party'. Brig. Gen. MacNeill said:

All I have to say is that on behalf of headquarters of the Third Eastern Division of the army and General Headquarters I wish to tender my sympathy and the Army's sympathy with the mothers, and relatives of the three good soldiers who had died doing their duty towards their country.

The foreman, Mr. E. Duggan, on behalf of the jury said:

I beg to tender their deepest sympathy to the mother and friends of these young soldiers and also to their relatives. We also trust that if the occasion arises the military authorities will look after the relatives of the deceased.<sup>14</sup>

The funerals of Privates Murphy and Byrne took place on Thursday, 24 October, at Kiltegan, Co. Wicklow and Clonmore, Co. Carlow respectively, with full military honours. Almost the entire Baltinglass garrison attended the funerals. Pte. Allison's funeral took place that same afternoon to St. Mary's Cemetery, Carlow.<sup>15</sup>

Applications for compensation for the soldiers' deaths were made by their families. James Murphy had a small farm at Mount Kelly, Co. Wicklow, and according to his sister's application for compensation

<sup>14</sup> *Nationalist and Leinster Times* 28 October 1922.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 4 November 1922; *Leinster Leader* 4 November 1922.



he was to leave this farm to her. She stated that he had been an active I.R.A. volunteer from 1918. The application of his two sisters for a pension was unsuccessful.<sup>16</sup>

Mary Byrne was awarded £5 per month compensation for the death of her son, Edward, and a gratuity of £40 which was later increased to £75. He had four younger siblings and an older sister, who worked on the family farm (a small holding of twenty-six acres) and an older brother who had joined the Civic Guards in April 1922. His father was a World War I veteran and had returned from frontline service unable to hear. Edward had worked on the farm until he joined the army on 2 July 1922 and sent home £1.00 per week of his wages.<sup>17</sup>

After service in World War I, Patrick Allison had joined the I.R.A. in Ballymore-Eustace and subsequently, while 'on the run' in Carlow, used the assumed name of Pat O'Hara. The *Nationalist and Leinster Times* of 25 March 1922 carried an apology from James Curran, of Dunshane, Harristown, withdrawing an accusation that Patrick Allison was in the Black and Tans in Carlow. A partial dependant' gratuity of £30 was granted to his mother, Margaret Allison.<sup>18</sup>

James Hunt died of his injuries in the Carlow County Infirmary on 28 October.<sup>19</sup> He may have been a member of the Killinure Company of the I.R.A. during the War of Independence, although he would have only been a teenager at this time. Rathmore I.R.A. leader, Patrick Nolan, claimed he received a dispatch from 'young Hunt', two weeks before the Truce in July 1921, which prevented the units arrest by the Black and Tans.<sup>20</sup> Hunt had joined the National Army on 6 June 1922 as a transport mechanic. His parents, James and Mary Hunt, Ballyconnell, Coolkenno, Tullow, Co. Carlow, received an allowance of 7s. per week and a gratuity of £25, later increased to £50, in final settlement of their claim for compensation.<sup>21</sup> His funeral took place to the family burial ground at Kilquiggan. All the business establishments of Carlow were closed during the period of the funeral.<sup>22</sup>

16 Military Service Pension Applications, File reference 3D123.

17 Ibid, File reference 2D241.

18 Military Service Pension Applications, File reference 2D4; *Kildare Observer* 28 October 1922.

19 *Nationalist and Leinster Times* 4 November 1922.

20 Information from Colm O'Rourke posted on <https://www.facebook.com/Coolkennohistory/posts/>

21 Military Service Pension Applications, File reference 2D77.

22 *Nationalist and Leinster Times* 4 November 1922.



## *The Survivors*

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It seems that Hugh Kenny lived a charmed life during the early part of the twentieth century. Having joined the British Army in Naas he served with the 6th Royal Dublin Fusiliers at Gallipoli where he contracted dysentery. In September 1916, having been deemed fit for service, Kenny was posted to the 11th (Reserve) Battalion, R.D.F., and was sent to France, where he remained until he was demobilised on 11 April 1919. On his return to Ireland he joined the Irish Volunteers and served as a commandant with Carlow Brigade. He later joined the newly-established National Army in February 1922 with the rank of captain and was in charge of a National Army outpost at Baltinglass, Co. Wicklow, when it was attacked by Ernie O'Malley with a force of 150 men. Capt. Kenny held the outpost until all his ammunition was exhausted and, after surrendering his small garrison of less than a dozen, was taken prisoner. He subsequently made a daring escape from his captors by swimming across the Slaney river, re-joining the National Army at Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford. On his demobilisation from the National Army in 1924 Hugh Kenny moved to London. He died, aged seventy, on 2 May 1963.<sup>23</sup>

Edward 'Ned' Nolan, of Weaver Square, Baltinglass, died at Baggot Street Hospital, Dublin, on 28 March 1975. His obituary stated that he was a well-known Co. Wicklow footballer and a former member of Carlow Brigade, I.R.A.<sup>24</sup>

A photograph taken by Richard Fitzpatrick, of the 1966 Easter Rising Commemoration in Carlow (p. 12), shows a marching group of Old I.R.A. and Cumann na mBan veterans. Among them are John 'Jack' Scully, a survivor of the Graney ambush and Jim Rice, one of the ambushers – a man who had possibly inflicted injury and death on Jack Scully and his comrades. A grand-nephew of Scully said that Jack bore no animosity towards Jim Rice, his former adversary.<sup>25</sup> Sgt. John Scully spent five months in various hospitals and was discharged on 21 April 1924 from the National Army as medically unfit, suffering from the

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<sup>23</sup> Information supplied by Catherine Kenny, grandniece of Hugh Kenny, at Newbridge Library, Co. Kildare, 7 July 2018; information supplied by Karel Kiely, genealogist, Newbridge Library.

<sup>24</sup> *Evening Herald* 28 March 1975.

<sup>25</sup> Jack Scully's nephew also had in his possession a photograph of the wounded survivors of the ambush in the Curragh Military Hospital, witnessed by author at Castledermot, Co. Kildare, 30 January 2018.

after effects of the wounds incurred at Graney. He received a gratuity of £60 for his injuries and a small pension for his IRA/National Army service. John Scully died, aged seventy-five, on 4 February 1976.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Ambushers*

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The ambush cast a deep gloom over the area. At early Mass on the following Sunday in Baltinglass, the Rev. Father O'Neill, P.P., was evidently very much affected when referring to the ambush. It was, he said, his painful duty to denounce in the strongest language the terrible murder which had occurred in the parish during the week. The cowardly murder was one of the saddest sights he ever witnessed and the brand of Cain will follow the perpetrator. He trusted that no person in the parish approved of these murders; It was a terrible thing to be sent before Almighty God without preparation. However, God wills not the death of the sinner; Our Divine Lord asked for forgiveness for those who had so cruelly put Him to death on the Cross. At second Mass the Rev. M. Brophy, C.C. also condemned the occurrence in unmistakable language. There was considerable National troop activity in the days after the ambush and several arrests were made, the majority being subsequently released.<sup>27</sup>

Lt. Nolan had recognised some of the ambushers and it was soon documented who was involved. The anti-Treaty unit responsible for the attack at Graney was known as the Carlow Active Service Unit (A.S.U.), or 'O'Connell's Column.' Thomas, or Tomás, O'Connell was an uncompromising republican, and a veteran of the War of Independence. A native of Edenderry, Co. Offaly, he was Vice-Commandant of Carlow Brigade before and after the Treaty. He subsequently escaped from the Military Detention Barracks, in the Curragh, and went on the run.<sup>28</sup>

O'Connell's Column consisted of about twenty men and included Larry O'Neill, a Tipperary man who had led the Carlow Active Service Unit in 1921. O'Neill had been wounded and captured along with seven other members of the Column during the War of Independence.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Military Service Pension Collection 24SP4625.

<sup>27</sup> *Leinster Leader* 4 November 1922.

<sup>28</sup> *Nationalist and Leinster Times* 6 September 1924.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Murray, 'Bushwhacked: The loss of the Carlow Flying Column, April 1921,' in *The Irish Story*, 3 September 2014.

In his witness statement given to the Bureau of Military History, on the activities of Carlow Brigade 1922-23, Adjutant Patrick Kane said:

At the Split, about half the members of Carlow Brigade went neutral, and the other half divided, about equally, between pro- and anti-Treaty. Most of the Republicans were quickly rounded up and interned in July-August, 1922, and there was then little or no active resistance in the Carlow Brigade area, except by a small A.S.U., which, I am glad to say, was made up of half the men who had been captured and sentenced after the Mullinaglownd debacle. They had succeeded in evading capture at the Cease Fire in 1923, and were led by the former Brigade Vice O/C, O'Connell, and Larry O'Neill, who led the 1921 A.S.U. O'Neill still lives, I am glad to say, but O'Connell was killed in a road accident in 1924, after he had made a dramatic escape from the Curragh glasshouse. They had not achieved much, beyond capturing and disarming a number of Free State troops in a schoolhouse, and a successful ambush between Castledermot and Baltinglass, following which a man, named Lillis, from Bagenalstown was executed. All the political and military conditions were against them, and they did extremely well to have been able to carry on to the melancholy end.<sup>30</sup>

In preparing this article many members of O'Connell's Column have been identified and their part in the Graney ambush explained.

**Laurence O'Neill** was Officer Commanding (O.C.), Carlow Active Service Unit. He made a sworn statement before the Advisory Committee of the Army Pension Board on 8 March 1937. Originally a volunteer with Clonmel Company he subsequently moved to Dublin where he served as a volunteer with the 3rd Dublin Battalion. He was transferred from Dublin Brigade to Carlow Brigade in September 1920 as a company O.C. Carlow Brigade was in the process of re-organising and O'Neill then became O.C. 1st Carlow Battalion. He was wounded and captured in an engagement at Ballymurphy, Co. Carlow, in which his Carlow A.S.U. suffered four killed and eight captured. O'Neill was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment. After his release from Dartmoor Prison, England, in January 1922, O'Neill organised units in the Carlow area. During the Civil War he was Commandant of the

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<sup>30</sup> Padraig Kane, Witness Statement 1572, Bureau of Military History, Military Archives, Dublin.

Carlow A.S.U./O'Connell's Column. O'Neill maintained the column was formed from the 1st Battalion which stayed together until the dump arms order in May 1923, but he did not safely return to his home until May 1924. Laurence O'Neill, subsequently married the former fiancé of Dick McKee, the slain Dublin Brigade commandant, and lived in Dublin until his death on 7 February 1970.<sup>31</sup>

**James Lillis** was the only member of O'Connell's Column who was executed for his part in the ambush. He was captured at Borris, Co. Carlow, and tried in Dublin, on 12 December 1922, on the following charges:

1. Having in his possession, without proper authority at Knockquire, Borris, a rifle on 14 November 1922.
2. Having in his possessions, without proper authority, a number of rounds of ammunition.
3. Having taken part in an ambush of Pro-Treaty forces at Graney on 24 October 1922.

Lillis was found guilty on all charges. He wrote several last letters to friends and relatives before his execution.

## *Letter*

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*My Dear Brothers*

*Just a line to let you know I am going to be executed this morning; all I want you to do is to pray for me. You need not fret about me, for I am going to Heaven with the help of God.*

*Tell my Mother that the man that let you in the day at the gate to see me was up with me all night, and that he did anything I wanted him to do; his name is -----, and any time you come to Carlow call to see him.*

*Remember me to Tom Kinsella and the Miller, and all the boys on the Column. I am dying as a soldier and a man. Get all the boys in the mill to pray for me. The priest told me I am going to Heaven, so you need not fret. Good-bye forever.*

*Your fond brother, Jim.*

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<sup>31</sup> Murray 'Bushwhacked: The loss of the Carlow Flying Column, April 1921'; Military Service Pension Application, Laurence O'Neill, MSP34REF21510.

On the night before his execution arrangements were made for Lillis to escape from Carlow Military Barracks, but he was convinced that he would be reprieved, so he did not avail of the arrangements which had been made. He was shot by firing squad on 15 January 1923 in the coal yard of Carlow Barracks and buried nearby. His remains were re-interred in Dunleckney Cemetery, Mhuinebeag, Co. Carlow, in October 1924.<sup>32</sup>

**Christopher Murphy** was another member of O’Connell’s Column. He was born in 1889 in Clonegal, Co. Carlow, and served with the Irish Guards for four years in France during World War I. On 22 September 1918 Christopher Murphy married Elizabeth Dooley, a servant, of Simonstown, Moone, Co. Kildare. On return to Ireland after his demobilisation Murphy worked as a gardener for Col. Frederick Fitzgerald Carroll, D.S.O., of the Royal Army Medical Corps (R.A.M.C.), of Moone Abbey. He joined the 5th Battalion, Carlow Brigade, I.R.A., in which he was appointed drill and musketry instructor and subsequently Battalion Quartermaster. Murphy claimed he lost his British pension as a result of his service with the I.R.A..<sup>33</sup> During the Civil War Christopher Murphy took the anti-Treaty side and joined what he called a ‘mixed column’ drawn from the 2nd and 5th Carlow Battalions. Murphy made an unsuccessful application for a Military Pension. His application read: ‘During the Civil War period he claims service against National Army forces at Baltinglass, Graney and Tullow.’ Christopher Murphy died at his residence at Simonstown, Moone, on 6 August 1964, and was buried in Moone Cemetery. His obituary said: ‘A gardener by occupation, he was employed for many years in Moone Abbey. He was an esteemed and popular figure in the area.’<sup>34</sup>

**Michael O’Neill**, born in Knockananna, Co. Wicklow, moved to Castledermot, his father’s homeplace, as a child. O’Neill was a member of 5th Carlow Brigade during the War of Independence. He was also a member of O’Connell’s Column and took part in the Graney ambush.<sup>35</sup>

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32 O’Dwyer, Martin. *Seventy-seven of mine said Ireland* (Tipperary, 2006), pp 203-5.

33 *Leinster Leader* 21 August 1964; Irishgenealogy.ie Group registration id 10469340 & 1803993; Christopher Murphy, Military Pension Application MSP34REF15040.

34 *Leinster Leader* op cite; Military Pension Application op cite.

35 Liam O’Neill (relative), email correspondence 12 February 2018.

**John Shannon**, of Knockroe, Killedmond, Co. Carlow, claimed in his 1952 pension application to have been one of the Graney ambushers, saying, 'I was with Brigadier O'Connell and sixteen others in the Graney ambush, near Carlow.' He claimed to have a German Mauser rifle which he fired during the attack. Shannon said he was wounded in the retreat from the Graney ambush. Capt. Hugh Kenny claimed to have fired 3-4 rounds from his revolver at the attackers, so this is a possibility.<sup>36</sup> Shannon was a captain of C Company, 4th Carlow Battalion, and had been training at Duckett's Grove when the Civil War began. He claimed to have taken part in several engagements against National troops and was captured on 3 November 1922, shortly after meeting I.R.A. Chief of Staff Liam Lynch. He was imprisoned for two months in Carlow Barracks and subsequently in Newbridge Barracks, where he remained until November 1923. He ended his pension application by stating 'In 1920 I had a position which was worth £100 per year. I lost it through my activities in the I.R.A.. I also spent a big portion of my father's property, of which I will never be able to make up. For the past 30 years I live on a small mountain farm – the poorest man in Co. Carlow.' After a career as a journalist reporting for the Wexford newspapers John Shannon died on 7 May 1975.<sup>37</sup>

**James Rice**, of Straw Hall, Carlow, was also a member of the ambush party. He joined the Irish Volunteers in April 1919 and rose to O.C. of A Company, Carlow Brigade, during the War of Independence. Rice stated that when the split came in the I.R.A. he went to a republican camp at Myshall. On the outbreak of the Civil War he joined the Carlow Active Service Unit and fought against National Army forces in an attack at Carlow Military Barracks, at the capture of Borris, and in attacks on barracks in Fenagh and Athy. In his pension application Rice said he took part in all engagements, including the Graney ambush where he said he fired his rifle during the ambush. James Rice died on 27 December 1978, in Carlow.<sup>38</sup>

**Mick Woods**, Russellstown Park, Palatine, Co. Carlow, joined the Irish Volunteers in 1918, and was initially neutral at the outbreak of the Civil War. However, he went on the run after visits by local National

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36 John Shannon, Military Pension Application MSP34REF17159; information supplied by Catherine Kenny, grandniece of Hugh Kenny.

37 Shannon, Military Pension; *Nationalist & Leinster Times* 23 May 1975.

38 James Rice, Military Pension Application MSP34REF38451.

Army troops who took the view that if you were not with them you were against them and began a campaign of harassment against the Woods family. Subsequently, National troops often raided the Woods' home, letting the chickens out, searching and throwing belongings around. Mick's mother and sister, Nellie, a Cumann na mBan member, were arrested and brought to Carlow Military Barracks for interrogation. After several hours of questioning they would be released, usually at night, and then had to walk the five miles home to Russellstown. Nellie was subsequently jailed in Kilmainham. Mick's brother, Paddy, was also active. Because of their actions the National troops had made a dire enemy. Mick Woods' outlook towards the National Army was hard and ruthless. It was said he burned the tender at Graney, to make sure the ambushed men were firmly dealt with.<sup>39</sup> Mick Woods died on 11 May 1947. He received a guard of honour from Old I.R.A. and Cumann na mBan comrades and a volley was fired over the grave at Bennekerry Cemetery, Co. Carlow.<sup>40</sup>

After the ambush the hunt for the O'Connell Column continued and on 5 December 1922 two men, Seamus O'Toole, Rathdangan, Co. Wicklow, and Myles Carroll, of Killedmond, Borris, were shot dead crossing a field at Straduff, Shean, near Garryhill, Co. Carlow. They were on the run at the time along with three others: Ned Kane, from Castledermot, Hugh O'Rourke from Tinahely, and Charles Byrne from Myshall. Two of these men were captured with Charles Byrne making good his escape. The group of men had stayed the previous night in the Shean area and were warned of a raiding party approaching whereupon they had left the house where they had been given refuge.<sup>41</sup> As they were crossing the fields at the foot of Knockdrinagh Hill they were spotted by the National troops who called on them to halt. The I.R.A. group opened fire and the National troops returned fire. Both Carroll and O'Toole were hit. Carroll died instantly and O'Toole shortly after. Kane and O'Rourke were captured.<sup>42</sup>

On his person Ned Kane had a .303 rifle, a bandolier of ammunition and a Sam Browne belt with revolver ammunition and three empty revolver clips. The two prisoners were taken to Tullow. The bodies of

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39 Information supplied from family member J. J. Woods, Naas, Co. Kildare, 30 January 2018.

40 *Nationalist & Leinster Times* 17 May 1947.

41 [www.myshalldrumpea.com/historical-ballads.html](http://www.myshalldrumpea.com/historical-ballads.html)

42 *Nationalist & Leinster Times* 9 December 1922.

their dead comrades were taken to the Mortuary at Carlow Military Barracks.<sup>43</sup> Ned Kane later escaped with the help of a National Army uniform smuggled in by Comdt. Paddy Cosgrove, of the National Army. He was the former O.C. of Castledermot Company, I.R.A., and a good friend of Ned Kane.<sup>44</sup>

The remains of Myles Carroll were refused entry into St. Fortchern's Church, Rathanna. Subsequently, the priest who delivered the graveside prayers in Rathanna Graveyard wore a dark suit and not the usual white vestments. This was in stark contrast to the reception given to the remains of Seamus O'Toole who had the burial of a hero in his family grave at Cranerin, Rathdangan. A ballad was written about Myles Carroll while a local hall in Rathdangan was named after Seamus O'Toole. In 2001 a granite memorial was erected at the roadside at Shean.<sup>45</sup>

Two years after the Graney ambush the leader of the O'Connell Column or Carlow A.S.U., Thomas O'Connell (age twenty-four) was killed in a car crash at Maganey, Co. Kildare, on 31 August 1924. Because of his republican activities he had only recently returned to his homeplace in Edenderry. He was travelling from Edenderry to Garryhill, Bagnelstown, when the car in which he was a passenger turned over after a tyre burst at The High Hills, Levitstown, half-a-mile from Maganey. O'Connell broke his neck, while the driver and another passenger survived unhurt.<sup>46</sup> There was a roadside memorial cross there for many years, but it was stolen some time ago.<sup>47</sup>

The funeral for Thomas O'Connell passed through the Co. Kildare towns of Athy, Kildare and Rathangan and in all those municipalities the newspapers reported 'there was conspicuous evidence of sorrow' and people stood to attention as the cortege with the family, I.R.A. Brigade staff and battalion and Cumann na mBan representation passed. Outside Edenderry the cortege was met by a huge crowd and escorted to the Church gates by a guard of honour, who remained with the coffin until the funeral. The coffin was borne by relatives and former I.R.A. comrades to its final resting place, and escorted by the

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43 Ibid.

44 Information supplied by Michael Dempsey, Castledermot, Co. Kildare, 30 January 2018.

45 [www.myshalldrumpea.com/historical-ballads.html](http://www.myshalldrumpea.com/historical-ballads.html)

46 *Nationalist & Leinster Times* 6 September 1924.

47 Information supplied by local historian Frank Taaffe, 12 January 2018.



local hurling and football teams, of which O'Connell was a member. The oration was delivered by Padraig Fleming, of Laois, and a volley of shots were fired over the grave. There were many members and ex-members of the National Army present.<sup>48</sup>

In September 1952 members of the Old I.R.A. unveiled a headstone and monument in honour of Thomas O'Connell. Born on 21 June 1899, in Edenderry, O'Connell moved to Carlow in 1918 to work in the furniture trade. He was Vice-Officer Commanding of the I.R.A. in Carlow during the War of Independence. During his time in Edenderry, O'Connell had been a strong supporter of the Gaelic League and promoted the speaking of the Irish language. To honour his memory, a large Celtic cross was unveiled in Monasteroris Graveyard, close to the monument erected to 1798 martyrs Anthony Perry and Fr. Mogue Kearns. Led by the flag bearer Paddy Cullen who carried a '98 pike, several thousand gathered for the unveiling. Thomas O'Derrig T.D., Minister for Lands, gave the oration remarking that the location was significant given how important the 1798 Rebellion was to O'Connell: those in attendance were reminded that his ancestor, Catherine O'Connell, had carried Kearns and Perry from the site of their execution to Monasteroris. It is likely that few in attendance were aware of the fact the O'Connell's older brother Patrick, now commemorated in the family plot, had died on 30 November 1917 near Cambrai, France, serving with the British Army's Machine Gun Corps during World War I. O'Derrig concluded by noting that O'Connell was 'a fearless man, a good man and he was true, to his creed and breed to the last. May God have mercy on his soul'. Local republicans and others were now urged to include this new memorial on their annual pilgrimage to Monasteroris.<sup>49</sup>

Sadly, no memorial was erected to the four men killed at Graney in 1922. The Irish Defence Forces have been wholly lacking in giving recognition to those from the National Army who lost their lives in the Civil War. This has now been rectified with the installation of an information board on the Castledermot/Graney road.

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48 *Nationalist & Leinster Times* 6 September 1924.

49 *Nationalist & Leinster Times* 6 September 1952; Information supplied by Ciaran Reilly, of Edenderry Historical Society, 30 January 2018.

On 24 October 1922 a confrontation took place at Graney crossroads on the road from Castledermot to Baltinglass when an anti-Treaty IRA column ambushed a pro-Treaty National Army vehicle. This resulted in the death of four National Army soldiers with five wounded.

The Graney Ambush was the most lethal attack of the revolutionary period in County Kildare.



## Comhairle Contae Chill Dara Kildare County Council



An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir,  
Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán  
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