

Lynch, William Fanaghan (Liam)

by William Murphy

Lynch, William Fanaghan (Liam) (1893–1923), chief of staff of the IRA, was born 9 November 1893 in Barnagurraha, Anglesboro, Co. Limerick, fifth child among six sons and a daughter of Jeremiah Lynch (d. 1914), farmer, and Mary Lynch (née Kelly). The family was politically active: his father's brother, John, took part in the rising of 1867 and his mother had been joint secretary of the Ballylanders branch of the Ladies' Land League.

Lynch attended Anglesboro national school (1898–1909). In 1910 he moved to Mitchelstown, Co. Cork, to take up a three-year apprenticeship in the hardware store of P. O'Neill, Baldwin St. He remained at O'Neill's – with the exception of a brief spell in Millstreet – until the autumn of 1915. He then moved to Fermoy, Co. Cork, where he worked in the store of Messrs J. Barry & Sons Ltd.

In Mitchelstown he was a member of the Gaelic League and the Ancient Order of Hibernians. He also joined the Irish Volunteers. In 1914, when that organisation split, he did not immediately join the militant rump. His move to Fermoy, where neither Volunteer faction was very active and where he was not known, coincided with a period of inactivity. Consequently, he did not take part in the 1916 rising, but it was a turning point for him. On 2 May 1916 he watched as the Kent family were led through Fermoy, having been captured by British soldiers. Richard Kent (qv) died from a wound sustained that day and Thomas Kent (qv) was executed a week later. Lynch became a committed Volunteer.

Once committed, Lynch's enthusiasm and aptitude ensured that he quickly attained positions of responsibility. From early 1917 he was first lieutenant in the small Fermoy company. In September 1917 the Irish Volunteers in east Cork were reorganised; nine local companies were formed into the Fermoy battalion and Lynch was elected adjutant. At the height of the conscription crisis (April 1918) he briefly quit his job to concentrate on organising the Volunteers. In May he was lucky to escape arrest during the sweep that accompanied the 'German plot'. When the immediate danger ended he returned to Barry & Sons.

In January 1919 the Volunteer organisation in Cork underwent a major restructuring. Three brigades were established and Lynch became brigade commandant of Cork No. 2. In April he visited IRA GHQ in Dublin to discuss plans and to seek arms. It was a frustrating experience; GHQ had few guns and were cautious about action. Throughout the summer of 1919 he pressed GHQ to authorise attacks on British targets as a method of acquiring arms and to prevent boredom and stagnation setting in among his men. Araglin RIC barracks had been raided (April), and two Volunteers, wounded during the rescue of Seán Hogan (qv) at Knocklong train

station (May), were sheltered in the brigade area, but the summer was a period of phoney war. Finally, GHQ sanctioned attacks if the primary aim was the capture of arms. In response (7 September 1919) twenty-five men from the Fermoy company, led by Lynch, ambushed fourteen British soldiers on their way to service in the Wesleyan church, Fermoy. Fifteen rifles were captured, one soldier killed, and three wounded. Lynch was shot in the shoulder (probably by one of his own men). As a result he had finally to leave his job and hide out in Waterford for a time. A series of arrests followed: among those arrested was Lynch's close friend, Michael Fitzgerald, who died on hunger strike in Cork prison in 1920.

Lynch spent the early months of 1920 at GHQ in Dublin. During this time he was offered the position of deputy chief of staff, but turned it down, preferring to return to Cork. Although not an articulate speaker (he sometimes stammered when angry), Lynch impressed those he met. His organisational talents, attention to detail, ability to inspire, and intolerance for those who wasted meetings endlessly discussing side issues, were noted. He was engaged to Bridie Keyes, but marriage was postponed pending a final settlement of hostilities. The traits most commented on were his devotion to the cause (he was frequently compared to a priest), his intelligence (which is portrayed as clear but unimaginative and rigid), and his affinity to the military life. He had a low tolerance for politicians and at all times considered the military wing of the movement to be of primary importance. He wrote in a letter: 'The army has to hew the way to freedom for politics to follow' (quoted in O'Donoghue, 86).

On 26 June 1920 Lynch, Sean Moylan (qv), and two colleagues captured Brig.-gen. Lucas while he was fishing on the Blackwater. Lynch gave a false name when he was arrested (12 August 1920) at City Hall, Cork, with Terence MacSwiney (qv) and ten others. All but MacSwiney were released four days later. He then set about organising a flying column within the brigade. Ernie O'Malley (qv) arrived from headquarters to train the men. This column achieved a major coup (28 September 1920) when they briefly captured Mallow barracks, leaving with a large booty of rifles, ammunition, and two machine guns. The British responded to this increase in activity and the war settled into a pattern of ambush and counter-ambush. The Mallow battalion suffered severe losses (February 1921) and Lynch himself narrowly escaped when four were killed during an encounter at Nadd (March 1921).

In early 1921 he sought to encourage greater cooperation between the various brigades in the south. Senior brigade officers met on three occasions to discuss cooperation and a plan to import arms from Italy. The importation project failed, but the First Southern Division was formed (26 April 1921), bringing eight brigades from Cork, Kerry, Waterford, and west Limerick together. Lynch was elected divisional commandant, making him the most powerful officer outside GHQ. His influence was further increased by his appointment as southern divisional centre and supreme council member of the clandestine IRB (March 1921).

Lynch was wary when the truce was called in July 1921. He worked hard to maintain order in his division (finding himself in regular conflict with Tom Barry, who was not always amenable to orders from Dublin) and to achieve a state of readiness in case the negotiations failed. For him the treaty was a failure; he wrote: 'We have declared for an Irish republic and will not live under any other law' (O'Donoghue, 231). When the supreme council of the IRB met (10 December 1921) he was the only voice against the agreement (the officers of the First Southern Division and all the Cork-based brigades shared his view). He was among the officers who insisted that an army convention should be called to discuss the treaty, effectively asserting that the army no longer accepted a position subordinate to the dáil. The army, he believed, was the army of the republic, and no civilian body could order it to abandon the republic. The provisional government tried to ban this convention, but it went ahead (26 March 1922) and elected an army executive (an outright rejection of civilian control); Lynch was elected chief of staff. Between March and June he worked hard to prevent a civil war. He believed unity could be maintained, even under the treaty, if a republican constitution could be enacted; and he cooperated with Michael Collins (qv) in promoting IRA activity in Ulster. In his adherence to the idea of a republic the practicalities of politics made little impact on his consciousness and he was dismissive of the popular support for the treaty. To his mind the majority of soldiers who had fought the war were opposed and the people 'were merely sheep to be driven anywhere at will' (Garvin, 43). He was horrified at the thought of civil war – distrusted as too moderate by Liam Mellows (qv) and Rory O'Connor (qv), he was locked out of the Four Courts for a time – but failed to see that his position was leading almost inexorably in that direction.

When the Four Courts were attacked he immediately left his headquarters at the Clarence Hotel to travel south. He was briefly detained, before reaching Kingsbridge station, and had a meeting with Eoin O'Duffy (qv). He was disgusted when Free State figures later claimed that he was released, having promised not to take arms against the government. The most plausible explanation of the incident appears to be that O'Duffy interpreted Lynch's comments, merely indicating disappointment that a war had started, as constituting a statement of intent not to involve himself.

His initial actions seemed designed to avoid full-scale conflict. He did not order an attack on Dublin, nor did he attempt to seize Limerick. He chose a containment strategy, seeking to hold a line from Limerick to Waterford for the republican forces. This failed, as the government sent troops in from the rear by sea. The republicans had no urban base when Lynch abandoned Fermoy (11 August 1922). He continued to meet individuals who sought a way to end the war, but intransigence had set in and he insisted that armed struggle would only end with a republic or absolute defeat. As early as August many republicans believed the war was lost and urged a reassessment of tactics, but Lynch rejected all such calls (Éamon de Valera (qv) and Liam Deasy (qv) urged an end at various stages). Operating from secret headquarters in Santry, he ordered the shooting of pro-treaty politicians in retaliation for the execution of republican prisoners.

Under war conditions it was impossible for the army executive to meet regularly, and this left Lynch in almost complete control. As the pro-surrender lobby grew within the republican forces Lynch delayed a meeting of the executive, claiming with some justification that it was too dangerous. He left Santry and attended a meeting of the Southern Division Council in the last days of February 1923. Sixteen of the eighteen officers there told him that the military position was hopeless. This forced the calling of an executive meeting (23–6 March). No agreement was reached. Lynch strongly favoured fighting on, but a motion from Tom Barry, calling for an immediate end to hostilities, was barely rejected (six votes to five). Another meeting was arranged for 10 April. On that morning a group including Lynch and Frank Aiken (qv) suddenly found themselves in danger of capture in a farmhouse on the slopes of the Knockmealdown mountains, Co Tipperary. They fled and were pursued. During the chase Lynch was shot in the abdomen. It seems clear that he was shot by the pursuing Free State soldiers, although Meda Ryan has considered the theory that he may have been shot by one of his own in order to remove the major stumbling block to surrender. His colleagues were forced to abandon him and he was captured. Initially the Free State troops thought they had caught de Valera (Lynch was also tall, thin, and wore glasses). He was taken first to a public house in Newcastle and then to hospital in Clonmel, but died from his wound at 8.45 p.m. that evening. His last request was to be buried beside Michael Fitzgerald in Kilcrumper cemetery, Fermoy, Co. Cork. On hearing of Lynch's death Ernie O'Malley wrote: 'You who were a living force/Are now a battle cry' (English and O'Malley, 132). O'Malley was wrong: the peace faction within republicanism was strengthened by his death and Aiken ordered the suspension of activities (27 April).

In 1935 a massive memorial, consisting of a round tower 60 ft (18.3 m) high, guarded by four bronze wolfhounds, was erected at Goatbridge, Co. Tipperary, near the site of his capture. Separate annual commemorations are held at Goatbridge and Kilcrumper. Three biographies have been written and the Liam Lynch memorial pipe band is based in his native Anglesboro. The Lynch family possess a substantial collection of private correspondence.

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