



# A city left devastated as

Under martial law, British forces had permission for 'official' reprisals. After an IRA attack outside a barracks, this reached its grim zenith in the Burning of Cork, writes **Catherine Holmes**

**T**he atmosphere of Cork city in the winter of 1920 was tense. In March, Lord Mayor Tomás MacCurtain had been assassinated by the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). Terence MacSwiney, his successor, was arrested in August on charges of sedition and died on hunger strike in a London prison in October. About 30 miles west of the city on November 28, the IRA killed 17 members of the Royal Irish Constabulary's Auxiliary Division at Kilmichael.

Unsanctioned reprisals against Irish civilians and their property were privately supported by British prime minister David Lloyd George. At a speech in Carnarvon in October 1920, he made his support of this approach public when he excused the conduct of the British forces in Ireland. General Macreedy, the British commander-in-chief in Ireland, declared martial law in counties Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary on December 10, 1920. Under martial law, a curfew of 10pm was imposed each night. The military was allowed to carry out 'official' reprisals against civilians as punishment for failure to give warning of an ambush against the police, and to execute republicans found carrying arms.

The IRA had observed that Auxiliary patrols usually left the main garrison, Victoria Barracks in the north of Cork city, about 8pm each evening. On December 8, 1920, an attempted ambush failed when the Auxiliaries did not appear. On the night of Saturday, December 11, a IRA second operation was launched following information that indicated Captain Campbell Joseph O'Connor Kelly, an intelligence officer and a high-value target, would be travelling with the Auxiliaries.

At short notice, six volunteers commanded by Seán O'Donoghue took up position behind a wall between Victoria Barracks and Dillon's Cross. One volunteer, Michael Kenny, stood on the road acting as a distressed civilian to distract the patrol. As it slowed down to check on him, the other volunteers sprang from their hiding place, throwing grenades and firing pistols at the Auxiliaries before disappearing into the night. Despite being outnumbered, they escaped safely. The attack had lasted only seconds but injured 12 Auxiliary policemen, and temporary cadet Spencer Chapman later died from his wounds.

Auxiliary police from nearby barracks quickly arrived as back-up. Residents were forced out of their houses and questioned. Seven houses were set on fire by the Auxiliaries in retaliation for the ambush. This was legal under martial law. Another group of Auxiliaries was sent to St Patrick Street in the city's commercial centre.

Journalist Alan J Ellis was intending to travel home just before 9.30pm when he witnessed a tram on fire on Patrick's Bridge. Groups of Auxiliary policemen had stopped the last trams and forced the passengers off to interrogate them under the pretence of looking for weapons, before setting the trams on fire. On St Patrick Street, witnesses reported seeing Auxiliaries smashing shop windows, firing their guns indiscriminately, looting from stores and throwing bombs into buildings to set them on fire.

Firefighters at Grattan Street Station under senior fireman Timothy Ring were alerted to the house fires at Dillon's Cross. While travelling to the scene they passed St Patrick's Street, where Alexander Grant and Co, a large department store, was on fire. Ring went to the Central Fire Station to alert Captain Hutson, commander of Cork Fire and Ambulance Brigade.

Hutson rang Victoria Barracks, asking for help fighting the fires, but there was no response. He then made sure that the Auxiliaries had not interfered with the city's water pumping station, which could have led to the city running out of water within 24 hours.

## Harassment and intimidation

The fire brigade made its way to St Patrick's Street, where multiple stores including Cash and Co and the Munster Arcade were ablaze. By 11pm, most of the south side of St Patrick's street was engulfed in flames and the fire was moving southward, claiming more buildings along side streets as it went. Many of the stores had apartments above them. The scale of the fires was unlike anything the firefighters had ever seen. They were undermanned and lacked modern fire-fighting equipment, relying on horse-drawn hose reels tapped into the city's water mains. They faced harassment and intimidation as they tried to stop the fire spreading. They were shot at by the Auxiliaries, with four firefighters being taken to hospital with bullet wounds. Their hoses were slashed open and driven over by lorries until they burst.

Across the River Lee, between 3am and 5am the City Hall on Anglesea Street was broken into and set alight by a group of Auxiliaries. The fire quickly extended to the Carnegie Free Library next door. Witnesses claimed that Auxiliaries and policemen lined the quay opposite City Hall around the fire hydrant and turned off the water several times. The two buildings and 14,000 of the library's books were reduced to ashes.

Around the same time in the north of Cork city, at the home of Daniel Delaney in Dublin Hill, a British services search operation took place. His two sons, Cornelius (30), and Jer-



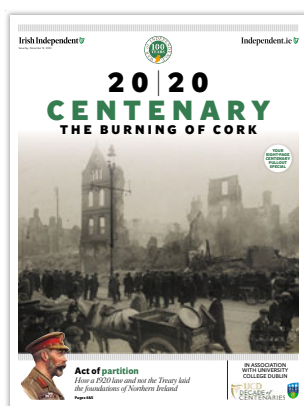
*At the home of Daniel Delaney, a British services search operation took place. His two sons were dragged from their beds, asked their names and shot*

emiah (24), both members of the IRA, were dragged from their beds, asked their names and shot. Jeremiah died instantly and Cornelius died from his wounds on December 18. William Dunlea, a relative of theirs, was wounded but survived. The two young men had been accused of taking part in the Dillon's Cross ambush, but they had not been involved.

By the afternoon of Sunday, December 12, the Cork firefighters were exhausted. Lord Mayor Daniel O'Callaghan requested reinforcements, which arrived from Limerick and Dublin Fire Brigades. They remained in Cork until Wednesday. The firefighters worked under constant danger of falling buildings and gas pipes being compromised. At least 2,000 people became unemployed and many were left homeless as more than 40 business premises and 300 residential properties were destroyed by the fire. Damage costing millions of pounds was done and an area of five acres had been affected. Cork City librarian James Wilkinson issued a public appeal for books and readers from Ireland, Britain and America donated some 10,500 volumes.

No deaths were directly related to the fires. One woman is reported as having died from a heart attack after her home was raided, the two Delaney brothers were killed and one Auxiliary was killed by the IRA. Several people were wounded by Auxiliaries.

On Monday, December 13, the events that had unfolded in Cork over the weekend were discussed in the House of Commons. When questioned, Sir Hamar Greenwood, the chief secretary for Ireland, blamed the citizens of Cork for starting the fires. Lord Mayor Daniel



### ON THE COVER

The aftermath of the Burning of Cork.  
Photograph courtesy: National Library of Ireland

Editor: Jon Smith  
Production: Joe Coyle  
Newspaper archives: Clodagh Finn

### FOR UCD

Ellis O'Brien, Director of Communications  
Dr Conor Mulvagh, Assistant Professor in Irish History  
Kate Manning, Principal Archivist

### PICTURES

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Razed: An area of five acres was affected during the Burning of Cork

PHOTO COURTESY: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND



# arson followed ambush



## Irish Independent

### Chief secretary's indignant protest in parliament

Extract from the Irish Independent, December 14, 1920

Sir Hamar Greenwood [chief secretary for Ireland], in the Commons, protested most vigorously against the suggestion, without any evidence, that the fires in Cork were started by the forces of the Crown.

"It is obvious to anyone," he added, "that a fire of this kind is the only possible argument that is now used against the government's policy in Ireland."

When pressed to say how the outbreaks originated, he said there was evidence that they were started by incendiary bombs. There are no incendiary bombs in the possession of the Crown forces in Ireland, but there are in the possession of Sinn Féiners.

#### Flight of refugees

The pitiable sight of hundreds of people in flight from their homes, says another correspondent, was witnessed in Cork on Sunday, the refugees carrying with them such articles as it was possible for them to remove, while there were regular processions of furniture vans, horse cars and other vehicles conveying furniture, shop or household articles to places considered more or less safe, the people being terrified lest there should be a renewal of the frightful outbreak.

Devastation: witnesses reported seeing Auxiliaries smashing shop windows, firing their guns indiscriminately, looting from stores and throwing bombs to set them on fire

PHOTO COURTESY: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND

O'Callaghan immediately renounced this statement on behalf of the city and demanded an impartial civilian inquiry. The British Government announced that a military court of inquiry chaired by General Strickland would investigate the fires. The inquiry convened from December 16 to 21, taking testimonials from 38 witnesses including 13 military, 11 police and nine civilians. The report placed blame for the fires on members of the Auxiliaries' 'K' Company. The report was never published, however, resulting in criticism from a number of British newspapers including *The Times* and the *Daily Herald*.

The 'K' Company of the Auxiliaries had been redeployed to Dunmanway, where on December 15, while travelling to the funeral of Spencer Chapman, they shot and killed Canon Thomas Magner and parishioner Tadhg Crowley. The Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress published a pamphlet of testimonies in January 1921, entitled 'Who Burnt Cork City?', attributing blame to the Auxiliaries, which helped to counteract Crown propaganda.

Eventually, in 1922 the British government accepted liability of £3m to the Irish Free State for the burning of Cork.

Ultimately, despite the scale of destruction, the episode failed to terrorise the population into submission and instead further damaged the reputation of the British state in Ireland.

● Catherine Holmes, MA in public history at University College Dublin



## Cork City in flames – night of horror

Extract from the Irish Independent, December 13, 1920

#### Public buildings and streets of houses destroyed – ambush of cadets

Practically the whole of the south side of Patrick Street, Cork, the principal thoroughfare of the city, in which were situated the leading business establishments, has been reduced to ruins by fires started after curfew began in Cork on Saturday night.

The damage already done is roughly estimated at £2,000,000, while it is believed that as an immediate result over 2,000 persons will be thrown out of employment.

In addition to the desolation in the business locality, extensive destruction was caused by the burning down of the Municipal Buildings, the City Hall and the Carnegie Free Library.

#### Excommunication

Most Rev Dr Cohalan, in a most vigorous address in the cathedral yesterday, denounced all outrage, murder, kidnapping, and reprisals, no matter by whom committed, and intimated that any Catholic taking



Boys search through the wreckage after the Burning of Cork.

PHOTO COURTESY: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND

part in such would be forthwith excommunicated from the church. All through Saturday night the

## Irish Independent

people were terror-stricken by the explosion of bombs, the firing of rifle and revolver shots, and the indiscriminate breaking in of windows, and shop fronts.

Responding to an urgent call, Capt Myers, of the Dublin Fire Brigade, and seven men left for Cork by special train with a large motor fire engine which has a special pumping apparatus.

#### Business centre in ruins: appalling damage

Citizens of Cork, the *Irish Independent* correspondent telegraphed last night, never experienced such a night of terror as that of Saturday. Residents in every part of the town were terrified all through the night, by rifle and revolver fire, such as never were seen before, the breaking and smashing of windows of business premises, and the crashing of falling buildings. This dreadful state of things continued till dawn, when it was seen that the greater portion of the chief business centre of Cork was in ruins, and that in many places fires were still blazing.