



Black and Tans forcibly cut the hair of Sineád (Orla Fitzgerald) in a scene from *The Wind That Shakes The Barley*

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# Hacked off: how both sides intimidated and punished women

The forcible cutting of hair was a key part of violence against women suspected of any connection with the enemy, writes **Mary McAuliffe**

In a report of September 20, 1920, the *Manchester Guardian* informed its readers that over the course of 24 hours, five young women in Galway city had been attacked and had their hair hacked off.

At 7.30 on the morning of the 20th, two masked men entered Baker's Hotel on Eyre Square and confronted Eileen Baker. They held her up "at the point of a revolver and cut off her hair".

This act was committed, the reporter surmised, because the young woman had given evidence at the inquiry into the killing of RIC Constable Edward Krumm on September 8. The officer had died in a gun battle at the nearby railway station in which IRA volunteer Seán Mulvey was also killed.

The report also suggested that Baker was targeted because military personnel stayed in and socialised at Baker's Hotel.

In response to the killing of Constable

Krumm and the attack on Baker, Crown forces went on a violent rampage across the city, assaulting people and burning property. As part of these reprisals they raided and attacked the homes of several women known to have republican sympathies.

The *Connacht Tribune* reported: “Miss Gertie Madden, Miss Margaret May Broderick and Miss Margaret Turke were taken outside [their] doors, and their hair cropped close with three pairs of scissors wielded by three men who spoke with an English accent, while a fourth held an electric torch.”

The forcible cutting of hair was an integral part of violence against women during the War of Independence and an “outrage” committed by both sides. In 1920 and 1921, more than 180 incidents of forcible and violent hair-cropping of women have been identified using a multitude of primary sources.

These occurred in almost every county, but were most heavily concentrated in Munster and in Galway. There was also a spike in forcible hair-cropping during outbreaks of violence in Belfast and the border counties in 1921 and into 1922.

During reprisals carried out by Crown forces in October 1920, in north Kerry, Bridget ‘Bridie’ Grady and Anne Lovett of Lixnaw were forcibly “bobbed” by the Black and Tans, who threatened to do the same to two McElligott sisters, aged 18 and 15.

Grady was informed by the Black and Tans that they were cropping her hair “because [her] brother had something to do with cutting the girl’s hair in the village”. In the previous weeks, several girls in Lixnaw and Listowel had been forcibly cropped by republicans for suspected associations or connections with the RIC and/or the military.

There are also many examples of such attacks on Cumann na mBan women or women suspected by the Crown forces of having republican sympathies.

In her military services pension application, Molly Alleyway (née Ring) of Youghal Cumann na mBan reported that she was beaten and forcibly hair-cropped by Crown forces.

Agnes Daly, a member of Limerick Cumann na mBan, suffered numerous raids on her home in Limerick city, including one in which she was attacked by soldiers, had her hair cut off and her hand seriously injured.

The violence of this attack is noted in a report to the *Irish Bulletin*, the IRA’s propaganda publication. During a Black and Tan raid in November 1920, she was knocked down and dragged by her hair down the garden path. She struggled with the men, tearing the mask and cap off one, but



Dr Mary McAuliffe  
PHOTO: GERRY MOONEY

despite this “her assailants cut off her hair and slashed her hand with a razor from the back to the palm, severing an artery”.

Her sister Carrie, who was trained in first aid, stitched the wound. Had it not been for this, Agnes was in no doubt that she would have bled to death.

**The Black and Tans said they were cropping her hair “because her brother had something to do with cutting the girl’s hair in the village”**

Despite its absence from many subsequent histories, the hair-cropping of women by Crown forces and by republicans was not a hidden aspect of the War of Independence. Dozens of cases were reported in the newspapers — national, local and British.

The hair-cropping of Babe Hogan, a member of Miltown Malbay Cumann na mBan, in October 1920, in Co Clare was reported by, among others, the *Cork Examiner*, the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Times* and the *Skibbereen Eagle*.

Late on the night of January 20, 1921 several policemen demanded entry to the house of Delia Brown in Kilmihil,

Co Clare, threatened her, held a revolver against her face and cut off her hair. She was later awarded £400 compensation for “the cutting of her hair and threats to her life”, and because she had not recovered from the fright.

Detailed descriptions of what happened to Brown appeared in the *Freeman’s Journal*, the *Cork Examiner*, the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent*.

One of the most widely reported cases of hair-cropping by republicans was that of Bridget Keegan, from near Tuam in Co Galway, who was attacked, assaulted, and had her hair cropped by armed and masked men, late on the night of April 30, 1920.

As many newspapers reported, the men took her out of the house, while clad only “in her nightdress... and cut her hair off with a shears... [they said] that was what she got for going with Tommies”.

Four local men were arrested, tried and found guilty. The Keegan case was reported in almost every local and national newspaper, as well in British newspapers such as the *Manchester Guardian*.

These reports of forcible hair-cutting by both sides during the War of Independence helped normalise these incidents as part of the war and served to instil fear and terror in women. It was used as a weapon of coercive control by republicans who wished to prevent ‘their’ women from forming personal relationships with the Crown forces.

Those forces themselves used it as a weapon of terror, intimidation and reprisal. There is also no doubt that other forms of gendered and sexual violence against women were also used, by both sides, including surveillance, threats, both verbal and written, as well as physical violence, indecent assault and rape.

There are also numerous examples of these, but it is the forcible hair-cropping that was the most common form of gendered violence during the War of Independence.

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### ‘I was too terrified to cry out... They cut the plait with a single clip’

From the *Skibbereen Eagle*,  
September 25, 1920

Miss Eileen Baker, of Baker’s Hotel, Eyre Street, had a startling experience on Saturday morning, her hair being cut by masked men. Miss Baker is 22, and, her father, who lives in the hotel, served as a captain during the war.

She recently saved a little boy from drowning in the canal, and gave evidence at the military inquiry touching the death of Constable Krumm, who had stayed at the hotel.

“The first thing I did was to open the door to admit the postman,” she said. “I had turned my back, when the folding doors were flung open, and as I turned round six tall men came in.

“They wore black cloths all over their heads and faces. One man walked up to me with a revolver. I thought at first that they wanted to go upstairs to the police who are living with us.

“Instead, another man pulled me into the middle of the hall, the other holding the revolver to me, whilst the man behind caught my plait near the head. I was too terrified to cry out, and there was no one about. They cut the plait with a single clip.

“They said very little, but they searched all the police coats and capes. They said before they left they would be back again.”

During ‘curfew’ hours on Saturday night parties of men, carrying revolvers and electric torches, wearing black and white masks, slouch hats, and uniforms [called on a postman and demanded to know the names of the men who cut Eileen’s hair]...

Subsequently the houses of Mr Madden, Mrs Broderick and Mr Turke were visited. In at least two instances admission was demanded “in the name of the Irish Republican Army”.

Miss Gertie Madden, Miss Margaret May Broderick, and Miss Margaret Turke were taken outside, and their hair cropped close with three pair of scissors, wielded by three men, whilst a fourth held an electric torch...

Giving details of her experience, Miss Madden said: “They brought me outside and closed the door, leaving mother in a terrified condition. They had shouted ‘hands up’ in the first instance, and held revolvers to me, but when I went outside they told me that it would be all right if I would be quiet.

“They treated me gently in the circumstances... When they had cut my hair off they let me go.

“They spoke with an English accent. But I was too upset to notice the uniforms they wore.”

### ‘That is what she got for going with Tommies’

From the *Irish Independent*,  
Tuesday, May 11, 1920

**Galway: For cutting the hair of Bridget Keegan, Cloondarone, Frank Jordan, Jack Jordan and William Jordan, brothers, and labourers, of Tuam, were sentenced to six months’ imprisonment with hard labour... Mr Golding CS said it was a blackguardly action.**

### Irish Independent

**Seven men entered the girl’s home at 12.45, dragged her out in her nightdress to the yard and cut her hair off, telling her sister that is what she got for ‘going with Tommies’.**

“We are out for Ireland free,” they said. All he would say was: “God help Ireland if these were the men to free her.” ... Mr Kilbride, RM [magistrate], said it was the worst case that ever came before two magistrates.