



'We were lined up against a wall

Tipperary player **Thomas Ryan** wrote of how he was captured, stripped naked and marched back to Croke Park, where he and his team-mates 'fully expected to be shot'

Born in 1897 in Ballylooby, Co Tipperary, Thomas Ryan was a volunteer and prominent footballer who was on the Tipperary team that lined out against Dublin on Bloody Sunday. From that day until the Anglo-Irish truce in July 1921, he went on the run and fought under Dan Breen in a flying column.

He later explained how news of the 1916 Rising in Dublin – which "raised my mind to a fever of excitement" – had spurred him to take political action.

He hoisted a tricolour from the highest steeple of the local Protestant church and, though he fell 16ft through the steeple floor to the next level, he was undeterred (and uninjured).

The following April when Seán Treacy visited the area, he helped to reorganise the Irish Volunteers and became vice-commandant of the Third Tipperary Brigade.

After the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, he took the pro-Treaty side and joined the new National Army of the Irish Free State. During the Civil War, he was wounded in the advance by Free State forces on Clonmel in August 1922.

He turned down an appointment as chief superintendent of the new Garda Síochána and served in the Army until the end of World War II. He was a founder member of the Tipperary Association in Dublin, and died in 1980, aged 83.

This is an extract from his autobiographical manuscript published with permission of the Tipperary Historical Journal.

CLODAGH FINN



Thomas Ryan (above) and (below) the Tipperary team return to Croke Park to the spot where Michael Hogan was shot, on the first anniversary of his death
PHOTO: THE GAA MUSEUM, CROKE PARK



was a member of the Tipperary All-Ireland football team which travelled to Dublin to play a match at Croke Park on Sunday, November 21, 1920, which became known afterwards as Bloody Sunday. We travelled to Dublin on the previous day.

An incident which happened shortly after the train left Ballybrophy station may have given rise to a statement which appeared in the press on the following Monday, that "a band of assassins had come up from Tipperary to carry out the shootings in Dublin on the Sunday". One of the players, Jacky Brett, who was killed later in the fighting, was with a Father Delahunty from Kilkenny in one of our carriages. A crowd of soldiers of the Lincolnshire Regiment, who boarded the train, came into the carriage and made some unseemly remarks to Brett and the priest.

Brett, resenting these remarks, went for them but he was knocked down and Fr Delahunty called for assistance. We rushed to the carriage and, when we saw what had happened, we saw red and Jim Ryan and I enjoyed ourselves immensely by playing handball with half-a-dozen of these soldiers.

When we finally had them all down for the count, we took two of them up and pitched them out through the carriage window... Considering matters in a calmer light, we fully expected to be met by military and police and placed under arrest when we reached Kingsbridge [now Heu-

with a firing party in front of us'



British troops guarding a wall plastered with a Sinn Féin advertisement during the War of Independence in 1920

PHOTO: UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

ston Station]. There was no indication of any reception party at Kingsbridge when we arrived there, but we decided nevertheless to scatter.

[Michael] Hogan and I were, in fact, the only two volunteer officers on the team and so went to Phil Shanahan's. There we learned of the plans to execute the British intelligence officers on the following day... We were not told any details of what was being done. We just heard that there was a big job coming off in the morning... I volunteered to take part in the job, whatever it was to be, on the next morning. In between times, we had gone to confession and felt then that we were fully prepared to meet anything that might turn up.

The first intimation of the shooting I had was when Phil Shanahan called on us the next morning to tell us about it... About 11 o'clock that morning, I got a message from Dan Breen... to say that he was returning to Tipperary soon and it would be very inadvisable for me to appear at Croke Park that day. Notwithstanding this appeal, I went to Croke Park to take my place with the Tipperary team on the field...

The match was in progress for about 10 minutes when an aeroplane flew overhead and fired a Verey light signal [flare]... A penalty had been awarded against the Dublin team, and I was about to take the free-kick when a burst of machine-gun and rifle fire occurred. The crowd of spectators immediately stampeded. The players also fled from the field in among the sideline

spectators except six of us who threw ourselves on the ground where we were.

The six of us who remained — Hogan and I and four of the Dublin team — were, I think, all volunteers. I suppose it was our volunteer training that prompted us to protect ourselves by lying down rather than rushing around...

Two of the players who were lying on the field at this stage got up and made a rush for the paling surrounding the pitch on the Hill 60 [now Hill 16] side, which was nearest to them. One by one we followed their example, and it was while Hogan was running from the field to the paling that he got hit by a bullet...

Going across to Hogan, I tried to lift him, but the blood was spurting from a wound in his back and I knew he was very badly injured. He made the exclamation when I lifted him: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph! I am done!" and he died on the spot. My hands and my jersey were covered in his blood.

Making a quick survey of the situation, I ran for a spot on the paling... I saw one 'Auxie' loading a round into the breech of his rifle who appeared to be looking in my direction. I dropped to the ground, and a youngster fell near me,

which I took to be from the shot that was intended for me. So, jumping over the paling, I got into the crowd.

At this stage the firing began to die down and I began to think. Realising that I was a wanted man — the police had been looking for me at my home a few days before I left — and that, therefore, I would probably be arrested at least, I cast about for some means of escape.

I made my way into a house in Clonliffe Road, where I thought I was safe. I was only a short time in the house, however, when it was surrounded by the Black and Tans or Auxiliaries. They forced in the door of the house.

One of them, seeing me, said, "There is one of the Tipperary assassins! Take him out and shoot him!" Two of them had bayonets drawn, and I was knocked down and the stockings and knickers ripped off me with bayonets, leaving me naked.

Just then an officer came on the scene and instructed the Auxiliaries to bring me back into Croke Park, where I would be shot with the rest of the team... I was marched along the road, quite naked... A man who was standing with his girl friend, with his hands up in the air, taking pity on my nakedness, threw me a coat; but his thanks for this was a blow from the butt of a rifle from one of the Auxiliaries...

I found myself eventually back at the railway wall inside Croke Park, where I was placed in company with the remainder of the team. I was still in my nakedness as the

Auxiliaries had refused to allow me to take the coat I was offered. The newspapers the following day made reference to a naked player. I was the one they referred to.

I and the remainder of the team were lined up against the railway embankment wall, and a firing party stood in front of us... We fully expected to be shot, but later a military officer informed us that, if any shooting or resistance took place during the searching of the crowd, he had orders to shoot two of us for every such incident.

Our clothes, which had been left in the dressing-room, were searched for documents or arms. Not finding anything like that, they relieved us of every penny they found in our pockets. That night, as we were penniless, an ex-British army officer, who was in sympathy with us and Ireland's cause, divided £50 amongst the team to enable us to subsist and get home to Tipperary. His name was Jack Kavanagh of Seville Place.

When our clothes had been searched by the Auxiliaries and they had found nothing incriminating, we were released and then we scattered...

I remained in Dublin over the Monday, returning to Tipperary for Hogan's funeral about Wednesday. I did not go home, however, as the police and military had raided my home looking for me that night, and they raided the place in search of me once, and sometimes twice, a week from then onwards until the Truce. From then on, I became a full-time volunteer.

The six of us who remained on the field — Hogan and I and four of the Dublin team — were, I think, all volunteers