

Reprisals on reprisals led

‘Counter murder’, Britain’s extraordinary alternative to peace talks, polarised public opinion and triggered Tom Barry’s fatal ambush on a company of Auxiliaries in West Cork, writes **Eve Morrison**

O

n November 28, 1920 in the West Cork parish of Kilmichael, an 18-strong ‘C’ Company Auxiliary police patrol was ambushed by an IRA flying column commanded by Tom Barry, a British army veteran still in receipt of his Great War pension. Sixteen Auxiliaries died. Frederick H Forde, seriously wounded and left for dead, recovered. Cecil Guthrie escaped but was later caught and executed, his remains hidden for several years. Three IRA Volunteers were killed or fatally wounded: Michael McCarthy, Jim O’Sullivan and 16-year-old Pat Deasy.

A search patrol found the Auxiliaries’ bodies on a lonely stretch of the Macroom to Dunmanway road the following day. Alexander Lewis, a member of the patrol, wrote to his mother three weeks later: “I can now kill a Sinn Féiner in quite a casual, conscientious way... it may seem a horrid thing to say, but if you had only seen a quarter of what I had seen, you would quite understand... every one of us went raving mad.” They burnt houses and haystacks in the vicinity before leaving. That same evening, Denis O’Sullivan, an agricultural labourer, was pulled out of a pub a few miles away and shot dead.

The ambush rattled the British cabinet’s bumptious confidence in its Irish policy. Until the end of November, prime minister David Lloyd George and his secretary of state for war Winston Churchill thought they were winning. Ignoring the urging of key advisers in the summer of 1920 to negotiate with Sinn Féin, they instead bolstered new coercive legislation with covert encouragement of counter-assassinations, torture and reprisals. ‘Counter-murder’ had been a step too far even for the hawkish Field Marshal Henry Wilson. After Kilmichael, it was evident that this extraordinary alternative to either making peace or declaring war had rendered the situation infinitely worse.

British and Irish evening papers began reporting on the ambush within hours of the bodies being recovered. News of the shocking confrontation between *sinnfeinistas* and *negraperdos* (Black and Tans), the *embuscade sinn-feiner à Kilmichael, près de Macroom* rocketed around the world via the vast web of overland and submarine telegraph cables that criss-crossed the globe by 1920. To use today’s terminology, Kilmichael went viral.

Several British and Irish photographers and reporters found the ambush site the next day. The *Cork Examiner* and Manchester *Guardian* published an eyewitness account that matched later IRA veteran testimonies:

When they reached the crossroads a terrific explosion was heard, and it would appear the road must have been mined... or else a bomb was thrown. The first lorry came to a sudden stop, and the occupants of the second, which was about 50 yards behind when they heard the explosion, endeavoured to reverse the engine of the lorry, with the result that it backed down the incline. Shots now rang out from all directions, but the firing lasted only 10 minutes, and there was then a complete stillness. The two lorries were then seen to be on fire. There was no sign of life... but one of the occupants was seen to endeavour to escape, and was shot down.



Retaliation: The façade of a house burned out by Auxiliaries next to the location of the Kilmichael ambush in Co Cork

PHOTO: DESMOND FITZGERALD. PAPERS, UCD ARCHIVES

Left: Tom Barry, who led the IRA volunteers in the attack

in a weak position to take the moral high ground: “How can we complain that officers are dragged from their beds and butchered unarmed on the spot if Sinn Féiners are treated in precisely the same manner?”

Several anti-war meetings and debates on the Irish question took place in early December. Trade union leader James H Thomas blamed British “military policy” for begetting crime. A Peace with Ireland Council event packed out the Albert Hall, although HH Asquith, the former prime minister, was heckled by Irish separatists in the audience.

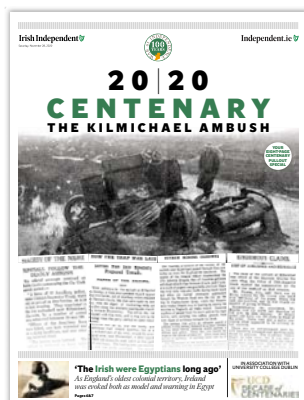
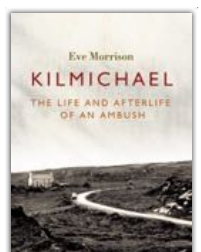
Irish events were also raised in “local parliaments”, the debating clubs for middle and working-class men (and a few women) modelled on the Oxford Union. Thanks mainly to the efforts of socialist, Labour and Independent Liberal attendees (some Irish-born), the *Croydon Advertiser* reported that the Southgate parliament ruled in favour of negotiating with Sinn Féin. In Thornton Heath they voted to recognise the “de facto Government now in existence in Ireland”.

The British government introduced martial law and “official” reprisals across Munster in December and made tentative but unsuccessful attempts to negotiate with the insurgents. Unsanctioned reprisals continued, as did Greenwood’s sustained public lying about them. In early 1921, the British Labour Party organised a mass campaign against reprisals and published an indictment of the government’s Irish policy.

At the cessation of hostilities in July, the Crown forces’ fatalities at Kilmichael remained the greatest loss of life in a single instance inflicted by the IRA during the War of Independence. British public opinion was acutely polarised. Even at the Auxiliaries’ funerals, while some clergymen attributed the ambush to the “Devil himself”, at least one called for a “spirit of forgiveness”:

By misunderstanding and sometimes by oppression she [England] has alienated the affections of a warm-hearted people. The many evil deeds of these days are the result of many centuries of misunderstanding and ignorance.

● Dr Eve Morrison is Canon Murray fellow in Irish history at St Catherine’s College, Oxford. Her book *Kilmichael: The Life and Afterlife of an Ambush* will be published in April



ON THE COVER

A reporter stands near one of the burnt-out lorries the day after the Kilmichael ambush

Editor: Jon Smith
Production: Joe Coyle
Newspaper archives: Clodagh Finn
Military Archives: Katherine Donnelly

FOR UCD

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

PICTURES

The National Library of Ireland, UCD, Military Archives and the Atlas of the Irish Revolution

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News of the ambush rocketed around the world via the vast web of telegraph cables that criss-crossed the globe by 1920. To use today’s language, Kilmichael went viral

On Friday, the *Daily Sketch*’s front page featured an eerie photograph of a reporter standing near one of the burnt-out lorries. It became the most widely reproduced and iconic image of the ambush.

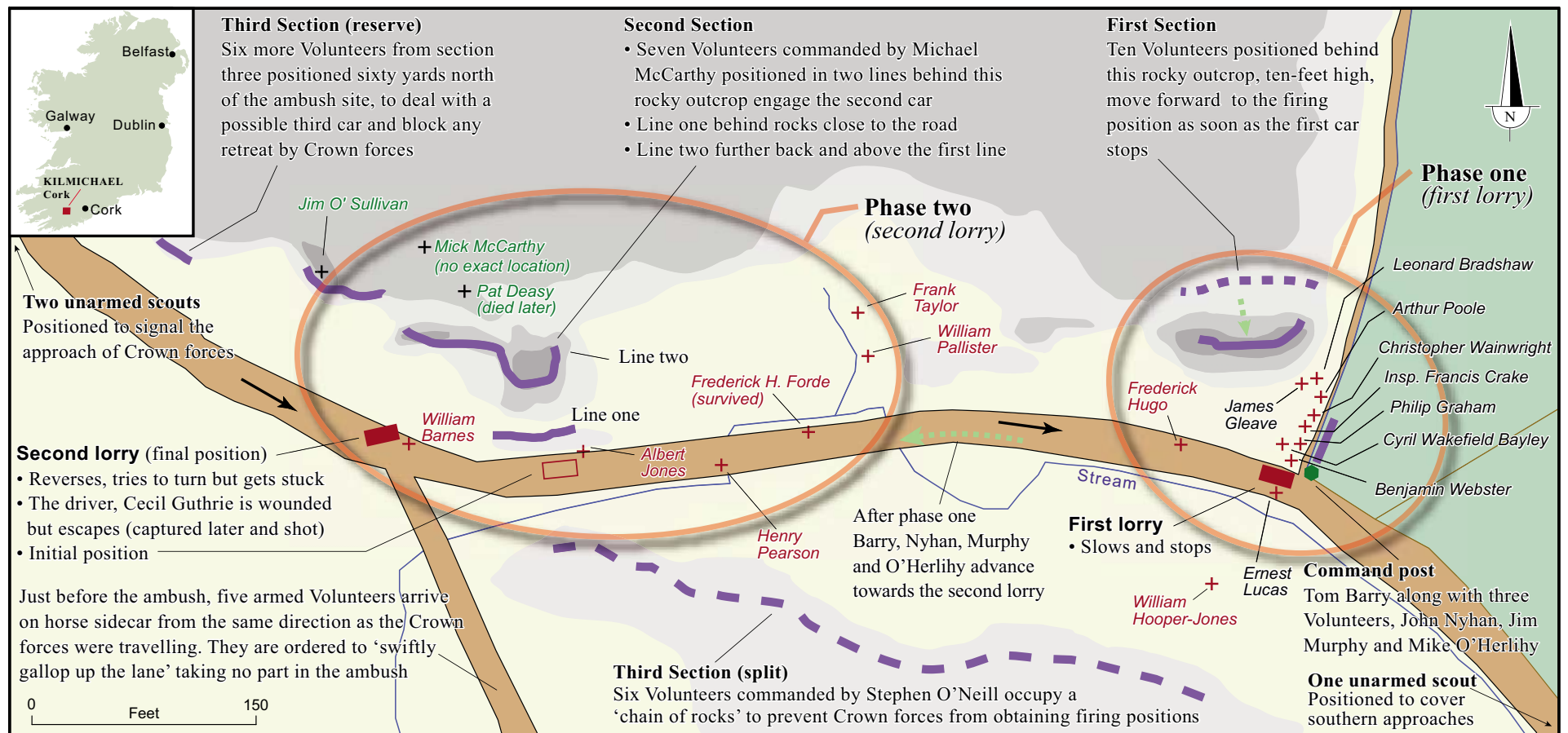
Press coverage and commentary reflected the growing mistrust of ‘official’ accounts of events. Lurid accusations of butchery and mutilation emanating from the House of Commons and Dublin Castle were widely published in the British press but not necessarily believed. Even the most hair-raising accusations often only hardened resolve in favour of already-decided opinions.

The *Morning Post* insisted British people wanted a return of the “methods of Cromwell in Ireland”. The *Glasgow Evening News* opined that the majority would be less horrified by Kilmichael than the actions of Michael Collins’s squad on Bloody Sunday:

There is an obvious though rough moral difference between killing men who are out on a patrol more or less prepared to defend themselves against attack and pulling men out of their beds to be shot without a chance to fight for their lives.

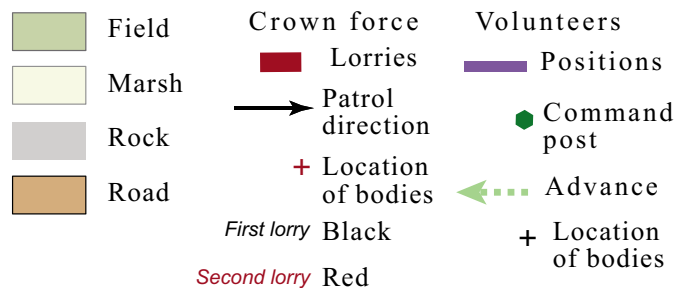
A *Liverpool Courier* editorial suggested the ambush was ‘not quite so bad’ as Sir Hamar Greenwood, Britain’s chief secretary in Ireland, claimed, pointing out that Britain was

to killings at Kilmichael



Phase two (second lorry)

1. Element of surprise is lost, Crown forces dismount from the lorry leading to a much more dispersed and prolonged engagement. This also leads to confusion regarding the 'false surrender'.
2. Jim O'Sullivan and Mike McCarthy are (most probably) killed during this initial phase of the engagement. Pat Deasy is injured and dies later.
3. The ambush is over in less than forty-five minutes.
4. Volunteers assemble on the road and collect arms.
5. Ambush party move off in a southerly direction.



Awful bloodshed in Co Cork ambush

From the Irish Independent, November 30, 1920

Irish Independent

Fifteen auxiliary police dead; One man missing; Heavy reprisals in the district; Many houses burned

The most appalling bloodshed yet reported in an ambush in Ireland occurred between Macroom and Dunmanway on Sunday.

The official report states that 17 auxiliary police, under District-Inspector Craig, were ambushed by between 70 and 100 men.

Fifteen of the auxiliaries were killed, one was reported dying, and another, who is missing, is believed to be dead.

A message from Cork states that reprisals at once followed, and several houses in the district are reported to have been destroyed. In Macroom business was suspended and panic prevailed.

Martin Walsh, aged 62, an inmate of Clare Lunatic Asylum, who apparently did not understand an order to halt during a raid on the institution by Crown forces, was shot dead.

[Walsh]... was proceeding from the building to the farm when called upon to halt. [He] ignored the order, which he apparently did not understand, and he was fired at.



The reprisals

A Press Association message states that... as soon as the news reached Macroom all business was suspended and many families fled. The PA message adds that it was reported that reprisals took place yesterday. "Shops in the district were set on fire, and scarcely a house was left undamaged. The people are clearing out of the locality in terror. Business was at a standstill at Macroom yesterday, all shops

being closed. As a precautionary measure against reprisals, large parties of auxiliary police arrived with rifles and revolvers and patrolled the town. Travellers who motored there were ordered by the military to leave."

Description of the fight

The Cork correspondent of the *Daily Chronicle* states that the two lorries had not long left Dunmanway on the return journey when at Shanacashel they were ambushed.

A re-enactment of the Kilmichael ambush featured in the 2019 RTÉ documentary series 'The Irish Revolution'

Immediately the first lorry came within range it was subjected to a terrible rain of rifle and revolver bullets. The second lorry opened fire in the direction of the attackers, but with little effect, judging by the heavy firing in reply.

Bullets kept pouring in on both lorries, the engines of each being rendered useless by the attacking riflemen. Thus exposed to a merciless onslaught, the occupants of the lorries did their best to seek cover where they could, but the firing... was most deadly. In a short time all the police in the first lorry were killed. The men in the second lorry bravely defended themselves, but the marksmanship was too true, and eventually only one of the auxiliaries escaped the rain of bullets.

The attackers, not hearing any replying fire, crept up to the lorries, where they found that 15 of the 17 had already been killed and one seriously wounded. The remaining one, who was uninjured, they made a prisoner. They then took away all the rifles, revolvers, and ammunition and escaped. As the patrolling party did not return to Macroom a search party was sent out, and they found the dead bodies on the road.