



Kilflynn's civil war – a community case study of internecine conflict

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Perched above the tranquil meander of the Shannow river lies the small, rural north Kerry village of Kilflynn. It is a place whose history is interwoven with the savagery and embittered legacy of civil war. The lives of five of its sons – Stephen Fuller, Timothy 'Aero' Lyons, George O'Shea, Timothy Twomey and John Shanahan – their families, and the wider community of 124 people in 1923 were forever marked by the events that took place at Ballyseedy and Clashmealcon caves in the last desperate weeks of the fighting in Kerry. It has been nearly universally accepted that, of all conflicts, civil wars are particularly cruel and leave an especially poisoned inheritance.¹ Stathis Kalyvas has pervasively argued that they are often the most vicious because, at a micro level, the violence engendered often results from local factors that drive the struggle's dynamics.² An in-depth study of Kilflynn's experience in this era can therefore serve, in many ways, as a microcosm of the entire national history of Ireland's internecine conflict – one that exposes its brutal and highly intimate nature. Likewise, the repercussions of what occurred there would reverberate just beneath the surface of this community for decades after.

Kilflynn's revolutionary record

Aged between 21 and 27 in 1923, all five men were farmer's sons and grew up close to one another.³ From an early age many of the group were recognized as natural leaders. Fuller and O'Shea were heavily involved in the setting up of hurling clubs in the parish, leading to the Tullig Gamecocks' victory in the 1916 Kerry county championship.⁴ In the spring of 1917, O'Shea, Fuller and Lyons enlisted in the Irish Volunteers as part of the national revival of the movement in the wake of the 1916 Rising. One of his superiors described O'Shea as 'a splendid type of man and a credit to the national movement' and

I am extremely grateful to the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) whose funding (via their 2023 Decade of Centenaries bursary) helped facilitate this research. ¹ David Armitage, *Civil wars: a history in ideas* (London, 2017), p. 10. ² Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 11. ³ Census of Ireland, 1911. ⁴ *Kerry Sentinel*, 30 June 1917.





he was quickly elected captain of the Kilflynn company, which became part of the 2nd Battalion, of the Kerry No. 1 Brigade.⁵ Fuller served as his first lieutenant.⁶ Lyons, meanwhile, was recalled by those who knew him as uncommonly brave, hardy and an expert marksman.⁷

By the war of independence, Twomey and Shanahan had also enlisted in the Kilflynn company which numbered around one hundred men in 1921.⁸ The unit served with distinction in that conflict. O'Shea led his men in a successful attack on the RIC in Abbeydorney on the night of 31 October 1920, killing two constables as part of countywide assault against the force in revenge for the death of Terence MacSwiney and the British government's decision to execute Kevin Barry.⁹ In May 1921, the company was involved in the engagement at Shannow bridge near Abbeydorney where the local IRA set an ambush only to be surprised by the swift arrival of a large, motorized convoy of Crown forces who approached undetected through a heavy morning fog. As a desperate firefight developed, they faced encirclement before Lyons crawled onto the riverbank and opened fire, seriously wounding the commanding auxiliary officer as he led a section of troops into the water from the other side. In panic, the enemy retreated allowing the IRA to escape unscathed.¹⁰ Due to such actions Lyons earned his evocative epithet of 'Aero'; derived from his reputation of appearing at engagements and then disappearing as suddenly from the clutches of his enemy as if into thin air.¹¹

The coming of civil war

In the aftermath of the war of independence, popular notions that areas like Kerry represented a solid bastion of anti-treaty resistance are challenged by what studies of communities like Kilflynn reveal. In reality, the treaty's terms proved hugely divisive locally and many IRA members there could not contemplate turning against former comrades for the elusive goal of an Irish republic. In these decisions, ideology and conviction were often secondary considerations to notions of comradeship and loyalty.¹² During a vote on the

⁵ Irish Military Archives (IMA), Military service pension collection (MSPC), DP6572/2RB591, George O'Shea. ⁶ Stephen Fuller, MSPC, W1RB1073. ⁷ Interview with Denis Quille in Cormac K.H. O'Malley and Tim Horgan (eds), *The men will talk to me: Kerry interviews by Ernie O'Malley* (Cork, 2012), p. 245; Dorothy Macardle, *Tragedies of Kerry, 1922–23* (Dublin, 1924), pp. 54–5.

⁸ Stephen Fuller, MSPC, MSP34REF6759. ⁹ T. Ryle Dwyer, *Tans, terror and troubles: Kerry's real fighting story 1913–23* (Cork, 2001), p. 224; Eunan O'Halpin and Daithí Ó Corráin, *The dead of the Irish revolution* (London, 2020), pp. 206–7. ¹⁰ Michael Pierce, Castleisland, IMA, Bureau of military history (BMH), witness statement (WS) 1190, p. 21; MSPC, brigade activity reports, A6/B/2, old records No. 1 Kerry brigade, 1st Southern Division (Part 2). ¹¹ Macardle, *Tragedies*, pp. 54–5. ¹² Charles Townshend, *The republic: the fight for Irish independence* (London, 2013),



issue, taken by the unit's members at the local Sinn Féin hall, Fuller recalled that 'nearly all went Free State', leaving just thirty-four behind.¹³ Some, like John Brosnan, O'Shea's neighbour in Fahavane, then volunteered for the National army once its forces landed in Kerry in August 1922.¹⁴ Indeed, O'Shea's brother Daniel (the company adjutant) and Fuller himself seemed to favour accepting the treaty before relenting at the last minute when O'Shea shouted across the hall; 'Stephen, you're leaving me alone'.¹⁵ For others, rejection of what the treaty offered was motivated by their abhorrence of the behaviour of some local officers in the embryonic National army. One, Jack Lynch, is recalled as patrolling around Stacks Mountain with a rifle on his shoulder, leading a gang that harassed those frequenting the local rambling house and trying to forcibly recruit young men (often at gunpoint). Lynch was also remembered as regularly intimidating a neighbouring widow and her children, because the eldest remained staunchly republican.

On the last day of June 1922, the republican attack on the National army garrison at Listowel heralded the eruption of civil war in Kerry. Members of the Kilflynn company, like hundreds of others, were then rushed to the developing frontline in Limerick.¹⁶ Yet, after government troops staged their surprise landings in Fenit and Tarbert, the Kerry IRA were obliged to disengage and turn for home to face this new threat. By September, the likes of O'Shea, Lyons, Fuller, Twomey and Shanahan remained on the run with the flying columns being organized across Kerry, engaging in an increasingly desperate guerrilla war against the enemy. One illustration of how this conflict was fracturing areas like Kilflynn came that same month. With the Catholic hierarchy vehemently denouncing the anti-treaty campaign, on 4 September several national newspapers reported on a proclamation posted up around the village. Signed by O'Shea, styling himself as the 'competent military authority', it declared that 'drastic action' would be taken against the local priest, Fr O'Sullivan, and any other 'persons who assist in establishing British Authority under the guise of the Free State in Ireland'. Fr O'Sullivan was accused of 'overstepping his sacred office' by using the altar to make 'incendiary statements calculated to cause serious disaffection among the loyal supporters of the Irish Republic'.¹⁷ Such activity is a stark illustration of what Gemma Clark has revealed was the common tactic of non-lethal 'social violence', used to intimidate and impose control at a communal level in the civil war.¹⁸

p. 361; Tom Doyle, *The civil war in Kerry* (Cork, 208), pp 68–73. ¹³ Stephen Fuller, MSPC, MSP34REF6759. ¹⁴ John Brosnan, MSPC, 24SP4190. ¹⁵ Interview with John O'Shea, Tralee (3 Nov. 2023). ¹⁶ Stephen Fuller, MSPC, MSP34REF6759. ¹⁷ *The Evening Echo*, 4 Sept. 1922. ¹⁸ Gemma Clark, *Everyday violence in the Irish civil war* (Cambridge, 2014), p. 15.



As the winter of 1922 approached, the increasing tempo of army sweeps and patrols in north Kerry reduced O'Shea's dwindling unit to an existence of evasion. Operational reports by the army's Kerry command describe round-ups being conducted by the 1st Western Division in Kilflynn on 25 and 30 October. During the latter, Daniel O'Sullivan, a well-known member of the Tralee IRA, was captured.¹⁹ Then, on 13 November, another raid of the village led to twenty-five local men being detained.²⁰ Already sensing the inevitability of defeat, Fuller was said to have discussed the possibility of the unit surrendering before their brigade commander, Humphrey Murphy, sent word that he risked being court-martialled if any such action was taken.²¹ By 7 December, the Kerry command was reassuring Richard Mulcahy, that the 'ceaseless harrying' carried out across north Kerry was bearing fruit; the 'Irregular's' organization was 'broken up and they move now only in small parties'.²²

Entering the spring of 1923, the republican position in the region was desperate. O'Shea's unit consisted of just a handful of men. Lyons had meanwhile been placed in command of another small column operating around Ardfert.²³ In February, the army, under their new commander, Major-General Paddy O'Daly, began conducting a fresh series of raids in the area. Perhaps inevitably, on 23 February the *Cork Examiner* reported that Fuller, O'Shea, Shanahan and Twomey had been captured 'in a dug-out at Glenballyma Wood'.²⁴ Local memory is that this was a sophisticated structure built under a ditch at a quarry next to the wood, about two miles east of the village. The hideout was also supposedly protected by an improvised early-warning system consisting of a series of tin cans on strings, which were attached to branches running from their encampment to a look-out position at the edge of the trees. The idea being that if an enemy patrol was spotted nearby a lookout would start tapping on the cans to alert his comrades. However, on the day in question no such signal was heard by those in the dugout and they were surrounded before they knew it. For years after, some claimed the strings had been deliberately cut to ensure the men could not have been warned.²⁵

Subsequently brought before O'Daly at Tralee's Ballymullen barracks, he was said to have told his subordinates; 'there's four softies here, soften them up'. They were then led away to be interrogated under the supervision of

¹⁹ Field general headquarters, Kerry command, operation reports, weekly report, 27 Oct. 1922, MA, CW/OPS/08/02. ²⁰ IMA, CW/OPS/08/02, weekly report, 18 Nov. 1922. ²¹ O'Shea interview.

²² Major General William Richard English-Murphy to Richard Mulcahy, 7 Dec. 1922, MA, CW/OPS/08/02. ²³ Timothy Lyons, MSPC, 2RB481. ²⁴ *Cork Examiner*, 23 Feb. 1923.

²⁵ Tim Horgan, *Dying for the cause: Kerry's republican dead* (Cork, 2015), p. 122; McElligott



Colonel David Neligan, who had been handpicked by Michael Collins to oversee the army's intelligence network in Kerry.²⁶ For most of them this interrogation amounted to being blindfolded and having their arms tied at their sides, as their heads, bodies and limbs were smashed with hammers. This went on for days, with an eyewitness remembering prisoners being thrown back to their cells so spattered in their own blood that their shirts clung to their backs. Although Fuller was spared this torture by the intervention of one local army officer who protested 'that I was a good fellow in the Tan time', he and the others were also put through the terrifying ordeal of a mock execution by firing squad. Eventually, the men were brought before a military tribunal and found guilty of taking up arms against the state. No sentence was, however, passed at these proceedings and instead they were imprisoned in the nearby workhouse, initially placed in a room which was partially flooded, forcing them to keep standing.²⁷

Ballyseedy and the Terror Month of March 1923

Their capture now condemned them to be victims of the 'Terror Month' set to be unleashed in Kerry. With the Free State government nearing bankruptcy, the pressure was mounting on commanders like O'Daly to crush the IRA threat as swiftly as possible.²⁸ By now the fighting in Kerry had turned into a vicious struggle characterized by vendettas, reprisals and numerous extra-judicial killings.²⁹ Yet, though depleted, demoralized and on the verge of defeat, the Kerry IRA continued to defy and retained the capacity to inflict notable casualties on their adversary. This reality, combined with O'Daly's callous determination to secure final victory created an environment in which the violent carnage reached its peak in the final weeks of the conflict.

The brutal killing of five National army personnel by an IRA booby trap at Knocknagoshel on 6 March 1923 was now met with ruthless retribution by O'Daly and his officers. On first hearing of the deaths, O'Daly reportedly had to be physically restrained by his men from exacting personal vengeance on whatever republican prisoner lay at hand.³⁰ Composing himself, O'Daly issued instructions that in future any barricades or dugouts encountered were to be cleared using republican prisoners secured from the nearest detention

interview. ²⁶ O'Shea interview; Doyle, *Civil war*, p. 118. ²⁷ *Kerryman*, 30 Jan. 1981; Macardle, *Tragedies*, pp. 17–18; Interview with Johnny O'Connor in O'Malley and Horgan (eds), *The men will talk to me*, p. 235. ²⁸ Michael Hopkinson, *Green against green: the Irish civil war* (Dublin, 2004), p. 380. ²⁹ Gavin Foster, 'The civil war in Kerry in history and memory' in Maurice Bric, William Nolan and Teresa Nolan (eds), *Kerry history and society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county* (Dublin, 2020), p. 477. ³⁰ *Daily Bulletin*, 22 Mar. 1923.



centre. Such action 'was not to be regarded as a reprisal but as the only alternative left to us to prevent the wholesale slaughter of our men.'³¹ Yet it quickly became evident that this order was merely a cynical pretext for the premeditated savagery that followed.

After midnight on 7 March, Fuller, O'Shea and Twomey were dragged from their cells and brought to the upstairs guardroom in Ballymullen barracks. Shanahan was left behind as it was said his spine had been so badly injured during his interrogation that he was temporarily paralysed.³² He was apparently not the only Kilflynn captive to escape what followed. Michael Relihan and Sean Fuller (a relative of Stephen) of Kilfeighny had been caught soon after the raid at Glenballyma. Thrown into a basement cell in Ballymullen, they were forced to climb onto the roof's rafters as heavy rain began flooding the room. On the night of 7 March, the cell door was opened to take them with the others, but on seeing the height of the water inside, the soldiers assumed both had simply drowned. Only later were they discovered clinging to the roof.³³ Meanwhile, in the guardroom, Fuller, O'Shea and Twomey were joined by six other republican prisoners (Patrick Buckley, John Daly, Patrick Hartnett, Michael O'Connell, John O'Connor and James Walsh). Captain Ned Breslin passed cigarettes around and informed them, as Fuller later testified, that 'we were to be blown to atoms as a reprisal for the deaths of the Free State officers killed in Knocknagoshel'.³⁴ Ordered into waiting lorries, the men were driven out to Ballyseedy wood, where the horror that transpired encapsulated the depravity that marked the last stage of the civil war in Kerry. On reaching a blockade of stones and logs thrown across the main road, the prisoners alighted and were put sitting around a landmine hidden underneath. Fuller, the sole survivor, would only finally speak publicly of what occurred in a filmed interview with John Ranelagh in 1979. An edited version of this would air in February 1981 in the civil war episode of *Ireland: A Television History*, the documentary series of which Ranelagh was associate producer. Before its broadcast, Fuller did a follow-up interview with the *Kerryman* newspaper:

When we arrived out anyway the language was abusive language it wasn't too good, one fella called us 'Irish bastards' and he was Irish himself ... They then started tying our hands behind our backs ... Just like children, we did as we were told and no more ... They then came round the front of us and tied our ankles and knees ... one of our own lads, asked to be

³¹ Dáil Éireann debate, 17 Apr. 1923, copy of O'Daly's order to all officers of the Kerry command, dated 6 Mar. 1923. ³² Interview with Bill Bailey in O'Malley and Horgan (eds), *The men will talk to me*, p. 101. ³³ McElligott interview. ³⁴ *Daily Bulletin*, 22 Mar. 1923.



let say his prayers and the fellow who was tying him hit him on top of the head with the rope and said, 'no prayers, our fellows didn't get any time for prayers' and he said maybe some of ye might go to heaven and he said ye might meet our fellows there ... [the soldiers] moved back about 150 yards to where the lorries were ... [Breslin] remained behind for a while and threw off our caps then and said: 'You can be praying away as long as you like'. I kept my eye on him all the time ... watching where they went like, it was that that saved me afterwards ... and it wasn't until the fellow beside me started saying his prayers that I thought of saying mine. I said goodbye and George O'Shea said: 'Goodbye, goodbye, lads' – and up it went, and I went up with it of course ... When I came down ... I made for the ditch anyway to get away ... I got across the river and went up into a bunch of trees and I sat down there to take a rest, I was played out. They threw in about five bombs into the bodies then ... I heard it, I heard the bombs going off. I didn't see it but then they opened machine gun fire as well ... then I kept going until I saw a gable of a house shining in the moonlight.³⁵

In his own words, Fuller had 'escaped death by a miracle' though 'all the skin was burnt off my hands and the skin burnt off the back of my legs. My hands were tied behind my back and met the full force of the explosion'. The intensity of the blast also meant that his back was 'lacerated' and 'peppered' with metal, gravel and gunpowder.³⁶

The pulverised bodies of the other prisoners were shovelled into crude coffins by their fellow countrymen. Buckley's body was split in two by the blast.³⁷ O'Shea's death certificate described how he suffered 'shock, haemorrhaging and a fractured skull' with the leg of another prisoner erroneously placed in his coffin.³⁸ Given the darkness and bloodshed, Fuller's body was not initially missed. It was only on 9 March that a statement was released acknowledging one prisoner was missing but it still mistakenly listed Fuller among the dead.³⁹ Unaware, for now, that Fuller had scrambled to safety, the official army report described how the prisoners met their fate by triggering a concealed IRA mine as they cleared a barricade. To add credibility to the story, several of the escorting soldiers were said to also have been injured by the detonation.⁴⁰ However, the deliberate nature of what took place was

³⁵ This quote is taken from a combination of Fuller's televised and newspaper interviews, see the *Kerryman*, 30 Jan. 1981; www.rte.ie/archives/2023/0228/1359421-ballyseedy-survivor, accessed 20 April 2024. ³⁶ Stephen Fuller, MSPC, MSPC6759. ³⁷ National Folklore Collection (NFC) Civil War Memory Project (CWMP), Story 22, interview with Paudie Fuller, Kilflynn, 12 May 2022.

³⁸ George O'Shea, MSPC, DP6572; O'Shea interview. ³⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, 9 Mar. 1923.

⁴⁰ Operation report, 14 Mar. 1923, MA, CW/OPS/08/03.



graphically illustrated by the alleged order given by O'Daly that those selected were to be 'all fairly anonymous, no priests or nuns in the family, those that'll make the least noise'.⁴¹ Niall Harrington, who served with the army in Tralee, would later explicitly state that Ballyseedy and the other mine atrocities that followed were 'deliberately planned by a clique of influential Dublin Guards' Officers' with 'the complete knowledge and encouragement of Major Gen. Paddy Daly', the 'mines used in the slaughter of the prisoners were constructed in Tralee under their supervision'.⁴²

Hours later, rumours swept Tralee about the explosion and birds eating human remains off the trees around Ballyseedy. After nine coffins were seen being unloaded at Ballymullen, a crowd of several hundred, including relatives of the victims, converged at the entrance around 4.00 p.m. demanding to be handed back the remains. As the cheap plank coffins were passed out, they were torn open so the bodies could be placed in proper caskets brought by relatives. However, the crowd soon rioted, stoning the onlooking soldiers after becoming enraged by the mutilated condition of the remains and the sneering contempt of the army's brass band, ordered by O'Daly to assemble and play jazz music as this macabre transaction took place.⁴³ The violence of that public reaction forced the army to issue a new directive that, 'Prisoners who die while in military custody in the Kerry command shall be interred by the troops in the area in which the death has taken place'.⁴⁴ Ballyseedy and its immediate aftermath can be seen as a classic example of gratuitous violence utilized to send a warning to the wider community. As Dave Grossman has argued, such events are intended quite simply to terrify people and undermine their will to resist.⁴⁵ Yet this incident alone was not seen as a sufficient reprisal or warning. Four other republicans were killed in similar circumstances a few hours later at Countess Bridge, Killarney, while on 12 March a final act of retribution took place against another five prisoners at Bahaghs, Cahersiveen. Yet, what is little known, even today, is that a third mine massacre was also attempted on 7 March when five more IRA captives were brought from Castleisland and told to remove another blockade constructed on the Scartaglin road. However, the device detonated there only succeeded in wounding a couple of the intended victims. Evidently, the failure of their subterfuge was enough to convince the soldiers to return these prisoners to the barracks.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Dwyer, *Tans, Terror and Troubles*, p. 369. ⁴² National Library of Ireland (NLI), Harrington papers, MS 40,629/1; Niall Harrington, *Kerry landing: an episode of the civil war* (Dublin, 1992), pp 148–9. ⁴³ Interview with Bill Bailey in O'Malley and Horgan (eds), *The men will talk to me*, p. 102; *Eire*, 31 Mar. 1923; Operation report, 14 Mar. 1923, MA-, CW/OPS/08/03. ⁴⁴ Quoted in Macardle, *Tragedies*, p. 19. ⁴⁵ Dave Grossman, *On killing: the psychological cost of learning to kill in war and society* (Boston, 1995), p. 207. ⁴⁶ NLI, Thomas Johnson papers, MS 17,140/18; *Eire*, 31 Mar. 1923.



Unfortunately for the government, the official explanations for these deaths were quickly countered by a sworn statement dictated by Fuller and passed to the anti-treaty press while he was kept hidden and received medical aid in several safe houses in the vicinity.⁴⁷ An internal army report on 9 March finally acknowledged that Fuller had survived but stated 'he has become insane'.⁴⁸ Understandably, Fuller's mental condition was showing signs of severe strain. May Daly recalls him being taken to her family home and slipping into a temporary coma.⁴⁹ A fortnight later he had a serious attack of nerves and for fifteen months after he was unable to sleep. He would spend the next year in hiding, making one brief trip to Kilflynn in June, after the ceasefire, to send word to his family 'to let them know I was okay'.⁵⁰ Meanwhile the growing public outcry over the Kerry mine killings became so intense that in the Dáil on 27 March the Labour Party leader, Thomas Johnson, directly questioned Mulcahy about the accusations.⁵¹ Scrambling to explain the conduct of his forces, Mulcahy ordered a military inquiry. Chaired by O'Daly himself, the findings, predictably, exonerated his men completely and declared 'that the civilians in question lost their lives in explosions while removing obstructions on the road ... the explosions were caused by land mines and bombs placed there by Irregulars'.⁵² Fully backing the inquiry's conclusions, Mulcahy reminded the Dáil that his forces were fighting: 'Irregulars in Kerry [who] have stooped to outrage of every kind'.⁵³

The brutal killings of O'Shea, Twomey and fifteen other republican prisoners in these landmine explosions served their purpose. Internal army reports soon jubilantly observed that morale among the local IRA was 'sinking to a low level'.⁵⁴ The military situation had become so favourable for the National army that, in April, Neligan was transferred back to Dublin with a promotion. A farewell dinner given by his fellow officers was described by them as an 'expression to their appreciation of all "Long Dave" had done to ... enforce the will of the people in Kerry'.⁵⁵ George O'Shea's family had not been among the crowd at Ballymullen to receive his remains. According to George's nephew, John, news of his death only reached them the following day when a party of three soldiers burst into their home and taunted his mother, Annie, and her four daughters about how George had been dealt with. During this incident, George's sister Julia was also indecently assaulted and,

⁴⁷ *Daily Bulletin*, 22 Mar. 1923; *Kerryman*, 30 Jan. 1981. ⁴⁸ Operation report, 14 Mar. 1923, MAI, CW/OPS/08/03. ⁴⁹ Interview with May Daly in O'Malley and Horgan (eds), *The men will talk to me*, p. 96. ⁵⁰ *Kerryman*, 30 Jan. 1981/13 Feb. 2013. ⁵¹ *Irish Independent*, 28 Mar. 1923. ⁵² NLI, proceedings of military court of inquiry into deaths of republican prisoners at Ballyseedy, etc., Co. Kerry with associated correspondence, etc, MS 22, 956, pp 31–2. ⁵³ Dáil Éireann debates, 17 Apr. 1923. ⁵⁴ General weekly report, 20 Mar. 1923, MAI, CW/OPS/08/07. ⁵⁵ *An t-Óglach*, 21 Apr. 1923.



in shock, Annie collapsed and had to be taken to bed. A cousin of the O'Sheas later brought George's remains home. No doubt owing to the proclamation O'Shea had previously issued against him, Fr O'Sullivan initially refused to let his remains into Kilflynn church. However, he was forced to relent when locals threatened to break down the doors themselves if the coffin was not allowed enter.⁵⁶ A week later, the *Cork Examiner* carried a brief report of the burial of O'Shea and Twomey in front of a large congregation.⁵⁷ Over the coming months, both Annie and Jeremiah Twomey, Timothy's father, would write to the government's compensation (personal injuries) committee requesting recompense over the nature of their sons' deaths.⁵⁸ But as part of the intricate cover-up surrounding these killings, files – kept secret until 2008 – highlight how, in July 1924, the secretary of the compensation committee assured the Department of Justice they would 'be very careful to guard against making any recommendation for payment of compensation' in these specific cases.⁵⁹

By mid-March, O'Daly was reporting that north Kerry was 'a dead letter' 'as far as the Irregulars are concerned'.⁶⁰ Indeed, the last notable action to take place there was the siege of Clashmealcon caves a month later in which Lyons and his small column (now the last IRA unit active in the region) met its end. That episode – detailed in Fionnuala Walsh's chapter – was another ordeal inflicted on the community of Kilflynn so soon after Ballyseedy. From the moment of his death, controversy surrounded the exact circumstances. A rope, lowered to pull Lyons from the caves after he surrendered, suddenly snapped as he neared the clifftop. He crashed onto the sea rocks below and his body, in the words of his sister Julia, was then 'riddled by machine gun fire' from the soldiers above.⁶¹ It was subsequently claimed the rope had been deliberately severed and that the culprit boasted loudly about it afterwards, something locals are adamant about to this day.⁶² Lyons' body was swept out to sea before being washed ashore and recovered two weeks later. Being so heavily decomposed it was only identifiable by the distinctive boots Lyons had been wearing.⁶³ A small group of friends travelled out to the spot and kept an all-night vigil over it. The next morning, his remains were brought back to Kilflynn, the escort stopping outside the family home to allow his mother, Margaret, one last look at her son. She had to be helped to the road amid

⁵⁶ O'Shea interview. ⁵⁷ *Cork Examiner*, 14 Mar. 1923. ⁵⁸ National Archives of Ireland (NAI), 2017/46/652, compensation (personal injuries) committee files, Annie Shea, Shanavalla, Kilflynn; Timothy Twomey, MSPC, DP5819. ⁵⁹ NAI, Department of Justice, H 197/7, secretary of compensation (personal injury) committee to Henry Friel, sec department of justice, 7 July 1924. ⁶⁰ General weekly report, 14 Mar. 1923, MA, CW/OPS/08/08. ⁶¹ Timothy Lyons, MSPC, DP5530. ⁶² Horgan, *Dying for the cause*, p.106; Interview with Thomas Harrington, Clashmealcon (3 Nov. 2023). ⁶³ Horgan, *Dying for the cause*, p. 106.



scenes so distressing they 'cannot be described'.⁶⁴ Lyons was buried next to O'Shea and Twomey and in July 1925 a large stone memorial cross was unveiled over their burial plot in Kilflynn cemetery in front of a large crowd monitored closely by a sizeable detachment of armed police and military.⁶⁵

The aftermath of civil war

T.S. Elliott once asked, 'whether any serious civil war ever does end'.⁶⁶ Similarly, Sande Holguín's research has cautioned against taking a too rigidly defined perspective about how internecine conflicts terminate, thereby missing all the subtle ways in which they can rage on.⁶⁷ The physical ending of the Irish civil war could not hope to dissipate the communal anger and resentment the conflict provoked in Kilflynn. Such emotions smouldered beneath the collective surface for years, occasionally breaching it. In April 1924, six men were charged with grievously assaulting a customer in the village pub. The men entered with a member of the Garda Síochána to whom they had given a lift. On seeing the uniform, the victim remarked he was 'nothing but a Black and Tan' before being set upon by the gang, some of whom were ex-National army.⁶⁸ Memories of past transgressions also lingered long. In an interview with John O'Shea, an incident involving Brian Cashell of Kilflynn, who served in the National army and was present at the Knocknagoshel explosion, is recalled. Cashell was also stationed in Lixnaw where, one morning, he confronted Sean Fuller demanding a gallon of milk for the garrison as Fuller made his way to the creamery. When Fuller retorted, 'if I'd arsenic I'd give it to you but not milk', Cashel cocked his rifle at him and took what he pleased. Later emigrating to America, Cashel returned on holidays to Kilflynn in the late 1930s. Recognizing him as he entered Parker's bar, Fuller waited until Cashel went to the toilet and followed him in to exact some delayed retribution.⁶⁹ It is also remembered that some locals, who supported the Free State, were now determined to use and abuse the latitude this now seemingly afforded them. Despite the local Kilflynn unit only numbering an estimated twenty men by 1924, Tom McElligott described how his father, Sean, chose to join the IRA in the years after the conflict precisely because of the intimidation and harassment being inflicted on neighbours and relatives – the mothers, children and sweethearts of republican men killed or imprisoned for their activity.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ *Kerry Champion*, 14 Sept. 1929. ⁶⁵ *The Liberator*, 9 July 1925. ⁶⁶ T.S. Elliott, *Milton: annual lecture on a master mind*, Henriette Hertz trust of the British Academy 1947 (London, 1947), p. 3.

⁶⁷ Sande Holguín, 'How did the Spanish civil war end? ... Not so well', *American Historical Review*, 120:5 (2015), p. 1767. ⁶⁸ *The Liberator*, 1 May 1924. ⁶⁹ O'Shea interview. ⁷⁰ Kerry County



Stephen Fuller finally returned to the family farm after a year in hiding but remained in fear of his life. When his brother Sean was charged with the concealment of two rifles in the family home in August 1925, his defence protested to the court that the police had explicitly come to the house looking for Stephen and that 'as far as he is concerned, he is under the impression that something else is going to be done to him. The man has gone through enough already ... He doesn't want people to be asking for him'. Tellingly, the judge seemed to accept the defence's implication that these weapons had been acquired for self-protection given what the Fullers had already endured. Therefore, despite the seriousness of the charge, the judge agreed to be lenient, fining Sean just £2.⁷¹ The physical effects of the explosion remained with Fuller ever after. Though he would make a sufficient recovery to captain the Kilflynn hurlers to the north Kerry league title of 1927,⁷² by the early 1930s, his health deteriorated again, and he was diagnosed as suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis while a host of 'foreign bodies' remained in his musculature.⁷³ In 1933, the military service pensions' board granted him a wounded pension of £150 a year. Three years later, he was awarded a 'Grade D' military service pension of over £52 per annum.⁷⁴ Although also diagnosed with 'neurasthenia' (a contemporary term for post-traumatic stress disorder) at this time, his son Paudie marvelled at how the events at Ballyseedy had never seemed to impact his mental health in later life: 'it did not affect him mentally, and I'm kind of shocked at that myself, you know, because I think that would drive anyone off their head. But it didn't. He'd never show it if 'twas there ... and I know because ... I tried him drunk, I tried him sober and I tried him middle of the road – same story. If there was [an inkling of it] there I would have spotted it'.⁷⁵

A highly popular and deeply respected figure, Fuller entered local politics after joining Fianna Fáil and, in 1937, he successfully stood for election as a north Kerry TD, serving in the Dáil until 1943.⁷⁶ Though he made references to his IRA record on the campaign trail he never referred to what he endured in the civil war. Those rare conversations were reserved for the company of former comrades and, on occasion, his family. As his son Pascal opined, 'people who have experienced these things, they just want to forget about it, blank it out.' Pascal emotionally recalls when he was twelve years old, stopping with his father at Ballyseedy where 'we went through the whole story'. One of the sole times he saw his father openly discuss the civil war was with a group

Library, Local History & Archives (KCA), Con Casey papers, P36A/3/4.2; McElligott interview.
 71 *The Liberator*, 25 Aug. 1925. 72 *Kerryman*, 29 Oct. 1927. 73 Stephen Fuller, MSPC, W1RB1073. 74 Stephen Fuller, MSPC, WV 94/W34D448. 75 Stephen Fuller, MSPC, WDP6809; Paudie Fuller, NFC, CWMP. 76 *Kerry Champion*, 10 July 1937; *Kerryman*, 26 June 1943.



of fellow veterans in a hotel bar in Dublin the night before a Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis in the 1950s. Later on, when he brought his young son up to bed Pascal asked him which side he felt had been justified in what had happened. His father paused, then replied: 'They were right, but they were wrong'. In Pascal's interpretation, this statement was his father's economical expression of how the Free State may have had the greater moral authority but that it washed that away in its vicious conduct of the struggle against its republican adversary.⁷⁷ Fuller's sons, Paudie, Pascal, John and Noel, have all, at various times, reflected on their father's remarkable magnanimity about his civil war experiences and how he frequently impressed on his young family the necessity of leaving behind any feelings of hatred, or 'any revenge as a result of anything'. When asked once by Paudie if he was ever tempted to exact retribution on people like O'Daly, Fuller replied: 'I thought about it a lot ... And I was going to do it. But I thought it better to let him live with it. It affected those fellas as well, like'.⁷⁸ Yet, his life still contained tragedy. He married Maryanne Twomey in 1931, the sister of his dead comrade Timothy. Their only daughter died an infant before Maryanne also passed away from tuberculosis just over two years later. In 1938, Fuller married again, this time to Annie O'Brien.⁷⁹

Fuller did involve himself in commemorative activity surrounding the events of the revolutionary struggle locally. In November 1927, he was elected to the republican soldiers memorial committee in Listowel, established to erect burial monuments to dead IRA members in the north Kerry region.⁸⁰ Ballyseedy itself has been commemorated annually since 1924. Like Clashmealcon, these frequent social remembrances served as another means of processing such historical distress in the community.⁸¹ The first anniversary saw a large procession march from the county hall in Tralee to the site of the explosion where a small cross had been erected. There, Annie MacSwiney (a sister of Terence) addressed the crowd and asked the audience, 'to remember that these men were butchered because they were loyal to the republic, while those responsible for the tragedy were traitors', before prophesying that the Irish people would soon 'build up a great constitutional government to secure the republic and get rid of the Free State government'.⁸² In 1925, Fuller acted as the master of ceremonies for a large gathering that congregated on the cliffs of Clashmealcon to say the rosary and listen to an oration by Tomás

⁷⁷ Interview with Pascal Fuller, Anglesea Road, Dublin (4 Apr. 2024). ⁷⁸ Paudie Fuller interview; *Kerryman*, 13 Feb. 2013; *Irish Times*, 21 Jan. 2023. ⁷⁹ *Kerryman*, 28 Feb. 1931/28 Oct. 1933/8 Jan. 1938. ⁸⁰ *Kerry Reporter*, 26 Nov. 1927. ⁸¹ Guy Beiner, 'Between trauma and triumphalism: the Easter Rising, the Somme, and the crux of deep memory in modern Ireland', *Journal of British Studies*, 46:2 (2007), p. 368. ⁸² *The Liberator*, 11 Mar. 1924; *Kerryman*, 15 Mar.



O'Donoghue TD.⁸³ Remarkably, however, Fuller was not present at the unveiling of the Ballyseedy monument, in September 1959, after a long-running fundraising campaign to build a memorial to the atrocity that had made him a household name across Kerry and beyond. While the popular story was that he was overlooked for an invitation by the Sinn Féin organizers because of his staunch Fianna Fáil connections, Pascal clarified that his father refused to attend over his concerns about the misappropriation of funds by the organizers.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, when the Ballyseedy anniversary came around every year, 'he'd always mention it, to make sure you wouldn't forget it' and would visit the site to pray for those killed there.⁸⁵ In his last years, Paudie helped convince his father to tell the story of Ballyseedy fully. When finally filmed in 1979, he expressed surprise that he 'not been interviewed before, I suppose it was because it was a job done by Irishmen'. Ranelagh recalled that the interview was 'a major coup, particularly as we got it so clearly ... He was delightful, marvellous and remarkably accurate'.⁸⁶ His death in February 1984 was met with glowing local and national tributes.⁸⁷

While there was no denying Fuller's civil war record, others in the locality looking for similar recognition met bureaucratic black holes. Margaret Slattery and Marie Condon applied for pensions for serving with the Kilflynn company of Cumann na mBan during the conflict. Both were rejected. In urging this judgment, Julie Hassett, the secretary of the association of old Cumann na mBan Kerry No. 1 brigade area, wrote in exasperation about applicants like the above 'who have no grounds whatever looking for medals and pensions'. She urged the assessors to 'scrap' Slattery's submission as she will 'probably prove or try to prove herself destitute ... there is a growing tendency among country people to give up all they have (while keeping rights) and after being granted medals, proceed to prove destitution'.⁸⁸

In recent years there has been a welcome historical focus on the number of participants of the Irish revolution whose physical as well as mental health was severely affected by their activity.⁸⁹ Denis McElligott of Glenalama, Kilflynn, is one local, poignant example. While serving with the National army, McElligott suffered a serious stomach injury after falling from a moving lorry during an ambush in Limerick, in July 1922. Developing a double

1924. ⁸³ *Kerry News*, 15 Apr. 1925. ⁸⁴ Paudie Fuller interview. ⁸⁵ Paudie Fuller, NFC, CWMP. ⁸⁶ *Kerryman*, 26 Dec. 1980/30 Jan. 1981. ⁸⁷ See *Irish Independent*, 24 Feb. 1984; *Kerryman*, 2 Mar. 1984. ⁸⁸ Margaret Slattery, MSPC, MSP34REF50891. ⁸⁹ See, for example, Marie Coleman, 'Compensation claims and women's experience of violence and loss in revolutionary Ireland, 1921–23' in Linda Connolly (ed.) *Women and the Irish revolution* (Dublin, 2020); Linda Connolly, 'Sexual violence in the Irish civil war: a forgotten war crime?', *Women's History Review*, 6 (2020); Diarmaid Ferriter, *Between two hells: the Irish civil war* (London, 2021); Owen O'Shea: *No middle path: the civil war in Kerry* (Newbridge, 2022).



hernia, he was discharged as medically unfit the following February and, unable to work, was 'kept' by his brother. By the 1950s, McElligott had succumbed to alcoholism and paranoid delusions and had been admitted to Killarney mental hospital, diagnosed with 'manic-depressive psychoses'.⁹⁰

Local legacies of civil war

The vicious killings Kilflynn suffered during the spring of 1923 long remained an emotive touchstone. While the scale of Ireland's civil war pales in the bloodier shadows of similar struggles across contemporary Europe, Anne Dolan rightly cautions against imposing any 'hierarchy of killing' to downplay the impact of this conflict when crudely measured against more violent ones abroad.⁹¹ Ireland's civil war retained its resonance in places like Kilflynn not only because of the body count it inflicted, but because of the nature of these killings. The deaths of O'Shea, Twomey and Lyons left anguished voids in this small community, voids into which multiple more lives collapsed in trauma and torment in the following years. As a result, the historical reminiscences of this bitter era echo throughout the community to this day. This can be especially felt through the oral history conducted for this research. The communicative memory, to use Jan Assmann's phrase, imparted by those interviewed attests to how the second generation that are still alive have become part of what Marianne Hirsch has identified as the 'generation of post memory', those often immersed in the trauma and processing of what their parents experienced.⁹²

Tragedy enveloped the distraught families of O'Shea, Twomey and Lyons. Left mourning their dead, they faced years of bureaucratic barriers to get some small compensation for their incalculable personal loss. The fathers of Lyons and Twomey were eventually awarded a gratuity of £112 as compensation for their deaths, the sum reflecting the military service pensions board's stringent view that both men had been only 'partially dependent' on their sons. No doubt their own thoughts echoed those of the father of another victim of Ballyseedy who indignantly retorted, 'I think you have put a very poor valuation on his life and had he lived to help me now instead of dying for his country I should not be in the poor position in which I now find myself'.⁹³

⁹⁰ Denis McElligott, MSPC, 4P1321. ⁹¹ Anne Dolan, 'Killing in "the good old Irish fashion"? Irish revolutionary violence in context', *Irish Historical Studies*, 44:165 (2020), p. 11. ⁹² Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka (translator), 'Collective memory and cultural identity', *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), pp. 126–7; Marianne Hirsch, *The generation of postmemory: writing and visual culture after the holocaust* (New York, 2012), pp. 4–6. ⁹³ Michael Connell, MSPC, DP6068, Letter from James Connell to department of defence, 16 May 1934.



The resentment that dripped through these pension applications was reflected in the account of the men's service records given by their brigade commander, Murphy. When requested to give particulars of Twomey and O'Shea's deaths, he pointedly wrote, 'ask Davy Neligan and Paddy Daly'.⁹⁴ In 1929, Margaret Lyons died prematurely, six years after burying her son. The *Kerry Champion* noted Lyons' killing 'was the preliminary blow towards undermining her health and the result was that she was seldom seen in public except when she strayed towards the little churchyard of Kilflynn, there to breathe a prayer and drop a tear and a flower on the cold clay'.⁹⁵

Unlike the others, O'Shea was the main breadwinner for his family having worked maintaining roads for Kerry County Council.⁹⁶ The devastation caused by his death in an emotional and material sense is painfully felt in the military pension applications submitted by his family and in the recollections of his nephew, John. For some time after, their home continued to be raided, and the family was harassed by members of the army. The health of O'Shea's father, Daniel, was seriously impacted and he remained on medication until his death aged 60.

Likewise, his daughters 'were never the same again'. Julia never recovered from the shock of her brother's killing or the ordeal she suffered at the hands of the soldiers who came to tell them. She died in 1926 'more or less from malnutrition, [she] wouldn't eat ... she couldn't eat'.⁹⁷ Another sister, Ellen, was eventually awarded a dependence allowance in 1959 after her mother's passing. She lived until 1990, often destitute, and died a spinster, aged 79, of 'weight loss, self-neglect, personality disorder and a viral infection'.⁹⁸ A third sister, Mollie, was only 21 at the time of Ballyseedy. A local member of Cumann na mBan, she had already suffered an alleged sexual attack by a raiding party of Black and Tans on the family home in 1921.⁹⁹ During the civil war she acted as a scout, cook and messenger for her brother's unit. However, the cruel murder of her brother and then her close friend Lyons so soon afterwards caused Mollie to have a complete mental breakdown. She would spend years in a local psychiatric hospital before the authorities classified her as a 'harmless lunatic' and 'hopelessly insane' and allowed her brother Daniel to take her back to Kilflynn to care for her. Mollie died in 1948 aged just 39.¹⁰⁰ Another thread of the traumatic tapestry that the civil war wove in places like Kilflynn.

⁹⁴ George O'Shea, MSPC, MSPR2RB591. ⁹⁵ *Kerry Champion*, 14 Sept. 1929. ⁹⁶ George O'Shea, MSPC, DP6572. ⁹⁷ O'Shea interview. ⁹⁸ George O'Shea, MSPC, DP6572. ⁹⁹ Mollie O'Shea, MSPC, MSP34REF57057, reference statement of Julia Hassett, 9 Dec. 1941. ¹⁰⁰ Mollie O'Shea, MSPC, MSP34REF57057.



Remarkably, Daniel O'Shea, through marrying Dianna Slattery, would become a brother-in-law to Ned Breslin, the officer who presided over Ballyseedy. Breslin developed a relationship while serving in Tralee with the teenage Mary Slattery, Dianna's older sister, who was employed as a typist at the army barracks at Ballymullen. Immediately after the civil war, they moved to Dublin but, insisting that she wanted to be married in her native parish, the ceremony was held in Clogher church in Ballymacelligott in 1924. Given Breslin's notoriety, the wedding took place under armed guard and the church premises was fortified with machine gun positions. Few of Mary's family attended. Nineteen years later, Daniel and Dianna wed, though at that time no one on that side of the family was aware of Breslin's connection with Ballyseedy. Only once after is Breslin recalled as accompanying his wife back to Kerry. On a visit to Tralee, he entered a pub to find Fuller sitting at the counter. Accounts vary as to what exactly transpired next, but Fuller quickly left the premises. A fear that Ballyseedy would catch up with him evidently haunted Breslin. On the day of the 1955 All-Ireland final, while catching a bus in Dublin, he was said to have pulled out his revolver when a group of young Kerry supporters, oblivious to their company, began singing the song, 'Ballyseedy Cross'. It was only after the televizing of Fuller's interview that the truth about Breslin was made known to Dianna. She contacted her sister and asked 'Did you know that you're married to a murderer?' After that, the siblings never spoke again, and both died in 1996.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

While the dead might finally lie in peace, there were those locally who would not extend the same consideration to the living. In the years which followed, suspicion, bred by the remorse of tragic death, would shadow several people in the community. For example, Mrs Ellen Wynne of Kilfeighny was falsely accused at the time of giving away the location of the hideout in Glenballyma. As a result, the family was 'boycotted out of the village' and 'half starved'. The son Mikey was also thrown off Kilflynn bridge, accused of being a spy.¹⁰² In later life, Fuller, according to Paudie Fuller, 'did regret [all] that ... "We wronged the family", he said, but that's a part of war'.¹⁰³ Paudie also claimed he had received information in Dublin decades later of who had given up the location of his father's dugout and shared this with Fuller who replied, 'I always had my doubts it was him, but I couldn't prove it'.¹⁰⁴ Though that

¹⁰¹ O'Shea interview; *Irish Examiner*, 18 Feb. 2023. ¹⁰² Census of Ireland 1911; O'Shea interview. ¹⁰³ Paudie Fuller, NFC, CWMP. ¹⁰⁴ Paudie Fuller, NFC, CWMP.



person's identity has never been divulged, it is recalled locally that suspicion stalked John Shanahan for the rest of his life because he had escaped Ballyseedy. Questions were asked as to why he had not been selected when John Daly was similarly paralysed but still brought out by stretcher to his doom.¹⁰⁵ For some, this was all the proof they needed to assume his guilt. Despite several accounts attesting to the injuries Shanahan had suffered at the hands of his captors, some remained convinced it had all been an act; that he was never tortured and that he was spared death at Ballyseedy for betraying his comrades.¹⁰⁶ Shanahan was remembered as being a particularly brazen and reckless individual in his youth. Before the civil war began, he was said to have robbed the local post office before immediately volunteering to investigate the incident. It was also claimed that while the unit was in hiding in Glenballyma, he used to sit out in the open, away from the dugout, near the road with a white cap on, so that its location quickly became known locally. Yet the entire unit was also recalled as taking unnecessary risks, frequently venturing over to the village for evening drinks.¹⁰⁷ Shanahan emigrated to America soon after his release, later returning home to Kilflynn. He worked for the rest of his life as a builder. This prompted some people to question how a man whose back was supposedly so badly damaged could work at such a physically demanding job.

Even into the 1970s, locals vividly recall how he was both treated and acted like an outcast.¹⁰⁸ Supposedly, three IRA men had come to Kilflynn with the intention of killing him in the early 1930s. After that, he lived 'like a hermit' outside the village in a property that was 'like a fortress', surrounded by high hedges with barbed wire and motion sensor lighting, and guarded by two Alsatians.¹⁰⁹ Until his own death, there were those, susceptible to the hearsay, who would turn back if coming upon him on the road, who would quickly drink up and leave by another door if he entered the local pub, who would look on with accusing eyes and held tongues. Síobhra Aiken's recent work has offered a more nuanced approach to the idea of an impenetrable 'wall of silence' descending on Irish society after the civil war.¹¹⁰ However, one understudied legacy of this conflict is the eruption of the communal breakdowns and mistrusts that played out for decades across Ireland in communities like Kilflynn. Though often unspoken, they illustrate the sort of enduring trauma that lingered on – one that could never be healed, at least not until the last of that generation went to their graves.

¹⁰⁵ O'Shea, *No middle path*, p. 87. ¹⁰⁶ Macardle, *Tragedies*, p. 17. ¹⁰⁷ O'Shea interview.

¹⁰⁸ McElligott interview; Paudie Fuller interview. ¹⁰⁹ O'Shea interview; McElligott interview.

¹¹⁰ See Síobhra Aiken, *Spiritual wounds: trauma, testimony and the Irish civil war* (Newbridge, 2022).