



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL
1992**

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ISSN 0791-0655

The Third Tipperary Brigade (1921-1923)

*Part 3 — The End of the Civil War**

By an tAthair Colmcille, O. Cist.

— 1 —

The year 1923 opened inauspiciously for the Third Tipperary Brigade. On 7 January Free State troops discovered dug-outs in the Tullamaine and Lisronagh districts, with documents, a printing press and a fairly large quantity of arms and ammunition. Five prisoners were taken, one being wounded.

This was followed on 16 January by the death of Commd. Martin "Sparky" Breen, O/C No. 1 Flying Column. Breen had visited his home and was returning through the fields with two companions when they were observed by troops approaching Tipperary town from Limerick Junction direction. The officer in charge called on the three to halt, and on their refusal the troops opened fire.

Breen and his men took cover behind a fence and returned fire. Some of the Free State party outflanked them, cutting off their retreat. The three Republicans refused to surrender, but in a two-minute fight Breen's parabellum jammed and he fell dead, shot through the head. One of his companions, Capt. Denis Ryan, was fatally wounded, dying six months later; the third, James McCluskey, surrendered.

Thus fell Sparky Breen at the age of 26. He had taken a prominent part in the fight for freedom and proved himself a courageous soldier against the Black and Tans. It was one of the ironies of the times that he should die at the hands of his fellow-countrymen, almost on the threshold of his home.

The war went on with unabated vigour. The policy of executions was in full swing; by the end of January 1923, 55 Republican officers and men had been shot by firing squads. Executions begot reprisals, which in turn led to counter-reprisals.

The first executions in Tipperary were those in Roscrea on 15 January of Fred Burke, Patrick Russell, Martin O'Shea and Patrick McNamara of the First Tipperary Brigade. In Clonmel a number of prisoners, including Sean Cooney and Patrick Brennan, were under death sentences, having been captured in arms. To prevent their execution, the Brigadier and Vice-Brigadier of the Third Brigade (Denis Lacey and Bill Quirke) warned some public representatives that if Cooney was executed they would be dealt with. Cooney was not shot.

Holding captured men as hostages to be executed in case of attacks by Republicans now became general. The Republicans decided to retaliate by seizing prominent supporters of the Free State

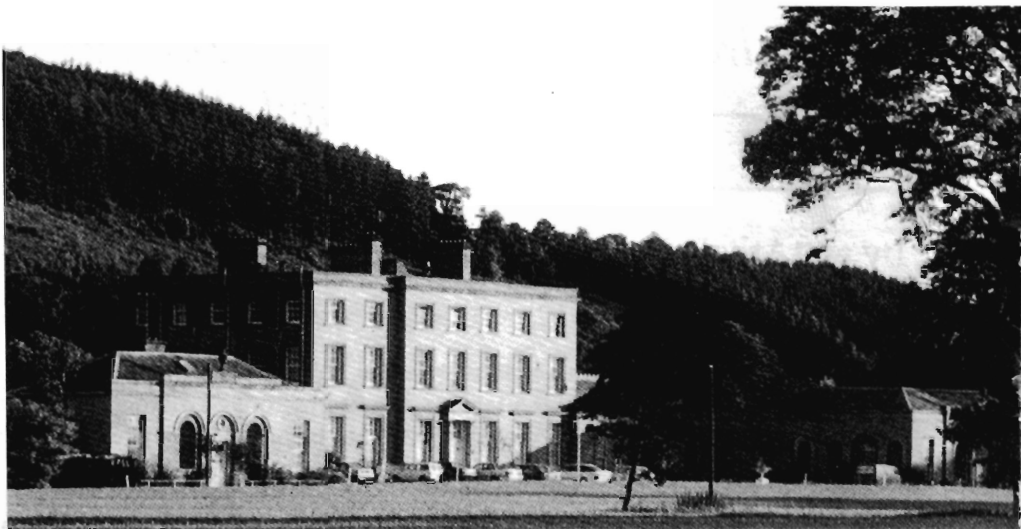
Government. On 30 January Senator John Bagwell of Marlfield, Clonmel was arrested in Dublin and taken by the IRA to an unknown destination. Major General Hogan, GOC of Dublin Command of the Free State Army, threatened reprisals if Bagwell was not released. This produced a counter-proclamation from Gen. Liam Lynch, Chief of Staff of the IRA.

Mansions and houses of Government supporters were now destroyed by fire. Tullamaine Castle

* Parts 1 & 2 appeared in the *Tipperary Historical Journal* of 1990 and 1991, respectively. For introduction to series, see *Tipperary Historical Journal* 1990, p. 9. — Editor, THJ.



*Marlfield House,
near Clonmel, the
seat of the Bagwell
family — razed to the
ground during the
Civil War.*



and other Tipperary mansions had been burned near the end of 1922, and Bagwell's beautiful residence at Marlfield was destroyed on 9 January.

As the winter drew to a close and the days lengthened, the Republican position grew steadily worse. Defeat seemed inevitable and discouragement spread through the ranks. The Free State Army had the people's support, while the Republican policy of making war on the railways had alienated the sympathies of even the minority still supporting them, as it threatened to engulf the nation in economic ruin.

Soon after Breen's death the former Brigade column was re-organised under Michael Sheehan. At The Commons near Ballingarry on 15 January contact was made with Free State troops comprising a cycle column, two lorry-loads of troops and two armoured cars. One Government soldier was killed and two Republicans taken prisoners.

Moving towards Kilfeacle and joined by Brigadier Lacy, the Republicans ambushed a motor-car containing Dublin Guards. After a short struggle in which two Free State men were killed, the party surrendered, the officer in charge (Commd. O'Connor) being captured. The following day the same column engaged Free State troops at Grange; John Crowe of No. 1 column was wounded and O'Connor escaped.

The main body of No.2 Column now retreated through the Glen of Aherlow and over the Galtees. Near Hollyford some of Sheehan's column were captured the following Sunday, among them Patrick Kennedy, Edward Hayes, James Ryan, Con O'Keeffe, James Carew, John 'Buddy' O'Donoghue, Michael Hibbert and Patrick Hally.

On 10 January Free State troops advancing through the hilly country near Slievenamon came into contact with Republicans at Nine-Mile-House, who fired when a house they were billeted in was approached for a search. After a brief exchange the Republicans withdrew.

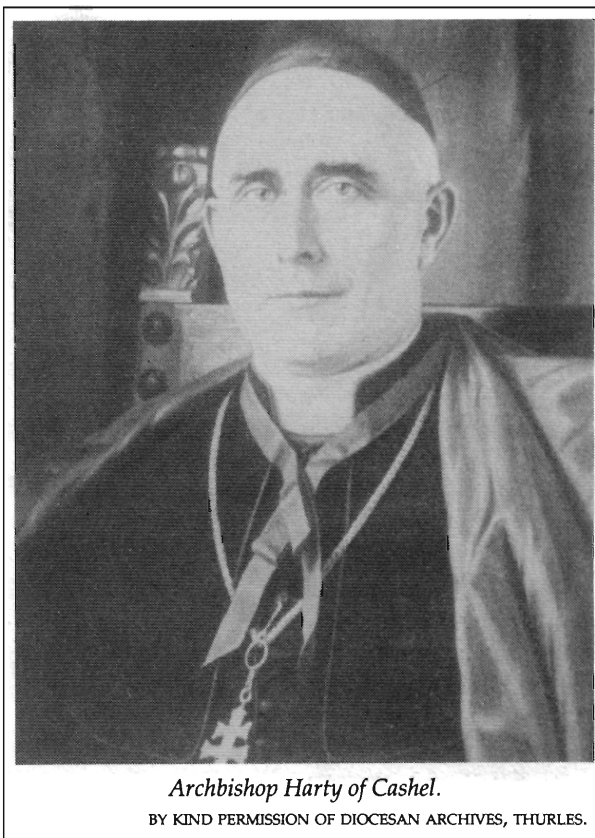
Meanwhile, the Republican military position continued to deteriorate. Large-scale sweeping operations by the Government forces contributed to the approaching Republican collapse. Talks of peace negotiations were rumoured since December 1922. Although Dan Breen, whose name was linked with these rumours, denied them, they persisted. Later Tom Barry, Archbishop Harty of Cashel and others were involved in negotiations which broke down. These affected the morale of the Republican forces.

By the middle of April 1923 all organised Republican resistance had collapsed, with only small bands holding out in remote areas. In operations on the Knockmealdown and Galtee mountains in January Sean Fitzpatrick (Divisional Adjutant), Michael Fitzpatrick (Divisional Quartermaster) and Bob de Courcy (Divisional O/C, Engineers) were captured. At the same time two more Brigade Staff officers (Tom Lynch and Tommy Ryan) were captured near Burncourt. Brigade HQ was removed from Ballybacon area to Rosegreen.

The Free State authorities now created a first-class sensation when they disclosed the capture near Ballylooby of General Liam Deasy, Deputy Chief of Staff of the IRA. Deasy concluded that the war should be ended, as further resistance was useless. When sentenced to death he asked for a stay of execution until he could communicate with leading Republicans, and was allowed to do so when he signed a demand for an unconditional surrender.

A number of Republican prisoners in Limerick jail now asked that four of their number be permitted out on parole to try to get a cessation of the armed struggle. This appeal was followed by that of 98 prisoners in Clonmel, who on 10 February sent a letter to Major-General John Prout.

Liam Lynch replied to Deasy for the Republican Government and the Army Council, stating that Deasy's proposals could not be considered. Then Richard Mulcahy, Commander-in-Chief of the Free State forces, offered an amnesty to all who surrendered before 18 February, 1923.



Archbishop Harty of Cashel.
BY KIND PERMISSION OF DIOCESAN ARCHIVES, THURLES.

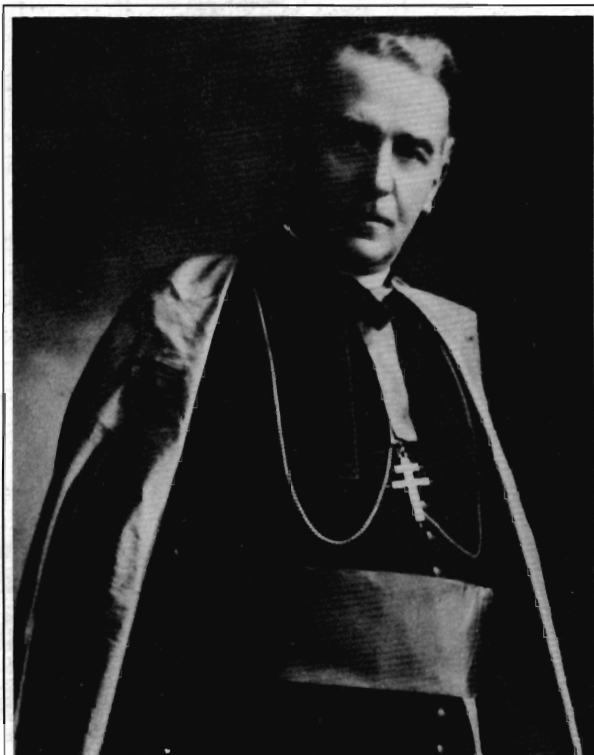
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All these efforts to bring about peace had failed, mainly owing to the Free State Government's insistence on an unconditional surrender of men and arms. The first peace effort was made at the outbreak of the Civil War. Madame Gonne MacBride, Mrs. Frank Sheehy Skeffington, the Labour leader Tom Johnston and the Dublin Lord Mayor Laurence O'Neill formed a peace committee to interview leaders of both sides. But this move came to nothing.

Archbishop Byrne of Dublin now intervened, and with O'Neill and Cathal O'Shannon of the Labour Party tried, but also failed. It was proposed that both sides retire from their positions and the Dail be convened; this was agreed by the Republicans, but rejected by the Free State Government.

A People's Rights Association now approached General Liam Lynch. He replied that defensive action by the Republican forces would cease when the Provisional Government ceased attacking them, and suggested that the Second Dail, "which is the Government of the Republic", take over.





Archbishop Byrne of Dublin.

BY KIND PERMISSION OF DUBLIN DIOCESAN ARCHIVES.

W.T. Cosgrave, head of the Free State Government, replied that the Second Dail's place had been taken by the Provisional Parliament, whose authority (he claimed) "the Irregulars" had flouted.

Other efforts were being made in private. Michael Collins himself had appeared to be on the point of trying to seek a settlement shortly before his death in August 1922. He was said to have announced privately his intention of contacting de Valera. He did contact Dan Breen, who received a message through an intermediary that Collins wished to meet him.

Breen discussed this with Lynch, with whose approval he set out for Cork to meet Collins. Collins was killed on the way to this meeting, so another opportunity for peace was lost. Rumours of peace revived around Christmas 1922, and again Breen's name was mentioned in press reports claiming that negotiations were being conducted with him.

On 8 January 1923, in an interview with the Dublin representative of the *Chicago Tribune*, Breen said: "I am willing to agree to the expressed will of the people and to accept the decision of a general election . . . we do not want to prolong this struggle one moment longer than is necessary."

By now ex-IRA men who had remained neutral in the Civil War had joined a peace campaign. At a meeting of former officers of the Mid Tipperary Brigade in Thurles around the end of December a resolution was passed calling on both sides to meet to end the war. Cosgrave's reply was that the basis of peace must be the Treaty and that the Oireachtas established under the Treaty should be "the sole sovereign authority".

The Neutral IRA Men's Association now appealed for a one-month truce; but neither side would agree. A new impetus was then given to the peace movement by the intervention of Archbishop Harty of Cashel, whose proposals were communicated to Comd.-Gen. Tom Barry; but this move seems to have ended there.

By Spring of 1923 the war was going very badly for the IRA. Its leaders were not optimistic that their men would be able to carry on a Summer campaign. In South Tipperary Free State troops continued to round-up prisoners on a large scale. Harassed columns were forced to move constantly, and in some cases men were almost in rags.

On 2 February operations in the Windgap and Rathgormack areas led to the discovery of dug-outs, seizure of arms and the capture of six prisoners, including Commdt. T. Fahy O/C of 8th Battalion. In Railstown district another large haul of Republican arms took place, and on 6 February four Republican prisoners were taken at Kilcash. At Bawndaniel on the same day after an engagement lasting nearly two hours 12 Republicans were taken, five of them in arms.

On 13 February Free State troops surrounded Lord Donoughmore's residence at Knocklofty, where IRA men were believed to be sleeping. Six men were captured, one (Martin Maher of A Company 5th Battalion) being badly wounded. The other five were Christy Riordan, Larry Delaney, John Burke, Tommy Murray and a man named Fitzgerald, all from Clonmel.

The next day six more men of the 6th Battalion were taken near Ardfinnan, and the following day again four in the Newcastle area, including Comdt. Jerome Davin, OC 1st Battalion and Capt. Con Scanlan of 5th Battalion. Capt. Tom Quinlan of Derrinlaur was taken at his home.

However, these losses by the Third Tipperary Brigade were nothing in comparison with the blow it received on Sunday 18 February 1923, when its leader Brigadier Dinny Lacey was killed in the Glen in Aherlow. His presence there was due to an invitation he had received to a meeting at Rossadrehid from neutral ex-officers of the IRA to discuss peace proposals, to which Lacy was believed to be now favourable.

Leaving Mount Bruis on 17 February, Lacey reached Ballydavid that evening with 17 men, whom he divided into small parties. He went for the night with Vice-Comdt. Paddy MacDonagh and Capt. William Allen to Rody Ryan's house in Ballydavid. Unknown to them, Free State troops were about to invest the Glen of Aherlow next morning, and by early Sunday morning the entire Glen was surrounded.

Hearing firing from Ashgrove House (where some of his men were billeted), Lacey set out across the fields. At the door of Ashgrove House they met Free State troops and opened fire, but the building was surrounded and MacDonagh badly wounded. Lacy now decided to make a dash for freedom, trusting to the element of surprise. In his rush three Free State soldiers fell mortally wounded and the rest scattered. MacDonagh, however, was unable to go any further, as he was weak from the loss of blood. He was discovered and removed to Tipperary hospital, where he died the next day.

Meanwhile, the Free State party set out in pursuit of Lacey and Allen, now surrounded on all sides. Compelled to cross a high fence under intense fire, Lacy mounted it first, but as he leaped down his automatic fell from his hand. As he stooped to pick it up, the cry came "Hands Up"; a party of troops lay concealed near the ditch, guns trained on him. His fingers closing on his gun Lacy fired it but got a bullet through the brain.

Although the war went on, the Republican cause was now doomed. In the two days after Lacey's death prisoners taken included Comdt. Maurice Meade, OC 2nd Battalion (captured near Mitchelstown), and Comdt. Moloney, OC of a Waterford Battalion, taken near Ardfinnan.

The Free State round-up continued. On 7 March, in another investment of the Glen of Aherlow, Con Moloney, who had succeeded Liam Deasy as Deputy Chief of Staff, was wounded and captured in the Glen, along with his brother Comdt. Jim Moloney and Tom Conway of Tipperary, the latter also seriously wounded. By now, according to Mcardle, the total in jails and internment camps is estimated at around 12,000.

— 3 —

Many of the Republican leaders now recognised the hopelessness of their position, and felt that steps should be taken to end the war. These suggestions were brought to Gen. Liam Lynch, who convened a meeting of the IRA Army Executive. Ten of 16 on the Executive attended this meeting, which was held from March 16 to 23 in the cottage of Pierry Wall, Knocknaree, Ballymacarbery. President de Valera attended for the Republican Government, and brought peace proposals which were put to the meeting.

Some, including Lynch, argued that the war should go on. Others favoured a surrender of arms, and more again were willing to end the fighting but wished to dump their arms. A proposal by



Comdt. General Tom Barry, that further resistance against the Free State Government "would not further the cause of independence", was defeated by six votes to five, and it was decided to adjourn the meeting to 10 April.

After this meeting of the IRA Army Executive in the Nire Valley it became known to the Free State authorities that Republican leaders were in the area, and plans were made to encircle them to bring off a sensational coup. As the Republican leaders began to assemble for the 10 April meeting a force believed to total 9,000 was concentrated in the Nire area and the mountains completely invested. Gradually the net was drawn more tightly round the IRA leaders.

Meanwhile on 1 April the Third Tipperary Brigade lost a fine soldier through the death in action of Capt. Jerry Kiely of the 4th Battalion, who had been staying with Dan Breen in the house at Lisvernane of Stephen MacDonagh, father of the late Vice-Comdt. Paddy MacDonagh. This house was attacked by Free State troops under Capt. O'Dea from Galbally, who was killed by fire from inside.

Breen and Kiely had agreed that they would retreat by the back door, but when Kiely saw a soldier fall by the front door he tried to escape through it. However, his Thompson gun now jammed and he fell dead by the roadside, shot through the lung. Breen, who had got clear through the back door, made good his escape through the woods nearby.

An account by one who had been present tells of the tragic events at the foot of the Knockmealdown mountains on the night of 9-10 April 1923. It was published in the paper *Sinn Fein* of 12 April, 1924.

"On the night of April 9-10, 1923, General Liam Lynch and a party of officers were billeted . . . south of Goatenbridge, at the foot of the Knockmealdown Mountains. At 4 a.m. scouts gave the alarm: a column of 'Staters' had appeared on the road . . ."

"At about 8 a.m. as we were about to have a cup of tea, a scout from the east ran in to tell us that another column was coming about 1,000 yards away, across the mountains to our left rear. Our only line of retreat was thus threatened and . . . We dashed up a glen towards the mountains . . . We were only a few minutes at the head of the glen . . . When the 'Staters' appeared over a rise, and our first shots were exchanged. We dashed on again up the mountain, a shallow river-bed affording us cover for about 250 yards . . . When we reached the end of the river-bed we had to retreat up a bare coverless shoulder of the mountain."

"This was the chance for the 'Staters'. About fifty of them had a clear view of us between 300 and 400 yards' range, we had gone about 200 yards up the shoulder . . . when a lull came in the firing. After twenty seconds' silence a single shot rang out and Liam Lynch fell, saying 'My God, I'm hit, lads' . . ."

"We picked him up and carried him along, one saying and he repeating the Act of Contrition. He was in terrible agony . . . Several times he told us to leave him down . . . (He) ordered us to go on, saying 'Perhaps they will bandage me . . .' We laid him down, took his automatic and notebook and left him."

The rest of the story is known from the Free State account. The spot where Lynch fell was the high mountain of Crohan West above Newcastle, marked today by a memorial in the form of a round tower which dominates the surrounding countryside. When the Free State soldiers found the tall bespectacled man lying on his back in the heather, his eyes closed, they thought they had captured de Valera. "Are you de Valera?", they asked. "I am not; I am Liam Lynch."

The wounded Republican Chief of Staff got first-aid from his captors and was brought down the mountain in a litter. An ambulance from Clonmel brought him to hospital there; he arrived at about 6.30 p.m., where he died at 8.45 p.m. on Tuesday, 10 April.

For two days the dead General lay in state dressed in uniform, with a guard of honour of local Cumann na mBan. The funeral to his native Fermoy was attended by all shades of public opinion.



The days after the death of Liam Lynch were a period of disaster for the Republican cause. The Free State military authorities, knowing that most of the Republican leaders were in the South Tipperary-Waterford mountain boarder area, left no stone unturned to capture them. Every nook and cranny was subjected to an exacting search.

All kinds of fantastic rumours circulated; one on 11 April was of the capture of Breen and de Valera near Kilsheelan. Then on 14 April came the news of the capture, unarmed and without resistance, of Austin Stack, the Kerry leader, near Mount Melleray. He had on his person a draft memorandum for signature by the IRA Army Executive, authorizing the President (de Valera) to order an immediate cessation of hostilities.

Lynch's companions had succeeded in crossing the Suir and reached the Third Tipperary Brigade HQ, then at Maher's of Blackcastle, on 13 April. It was late that night when Frank Aiken, Bill Quirke, Sean Hyde and Sean O'Meara arrived. Three newcomers appeared — Brigade Adjutant John Cleary, Brigade Intelligence Officer Theo English and Capt. Ned Somers, former Free State OC in Callan.

The following morning Free State troops converged on the ruined castle at Castleblake; they had received information that it was being used by the IRA. These columns were led by Capt. Quinlan and Lieut. Patrick Kennedy, the latter a native of Rosegreen. He called on the occupants to surrender; Cleary, who was inside, gave himself up. Kennedy then fired three shots through the door and began to batter down the door.

Suddenly a bomb was thrown from inside. Kennedy was so badly wounded in the head and chest that he died two days later. The explosion brought troops from all sides as Ned Somers emerged, revolver in hand and firing as he ran. A sentry killed him on the spot. English next appeared and dashed through, but was also shot on the spot. A native of Tipperary town and originally in the 4th Battalion, he had been attached to the 5th for most of his career.

When the party at Brigade HQ heard of the events at Castleblake they headed for the Glen of Aherlow. That same day three more important IRA officers were taken; one was Comdt. General Frank Barrett, OC 1st Western Division and another was Sean Gaynor, OC 3rd Southern Division.

Even this did not complete the captures. Dan Breen with two others had managed after five days on the mountains to reach a dug-out at Longford near Galbally on the Limerick border; with him also was Tim Donovan, whose home was nearby. Breen later told what happened then. "From (that) sleeping I was awakened by a heavy tramp of marching men above. I jumped out and looked into the barrels of several Free State men above. I had no option but to surrender."

The Tipperary Republican columns were now falling to pieces. What was left of Sheehan's column still moved around, but did little fighting. Portion of the old 5th Battalion also roved through the Waterford mountains led by Jim Nugent. Other scattered units were in hiding here and there, easy prey for Free State troops.

So successful were the Free State military operations that in late April General Prout declared himself satisfied that there was no longer any large body of organised IRA forces in the South Tipperary or Waterford Mountains — though, he admitted, it was possible, owing to the nature of the terrain, that some still hid in isolated hills.

On 20 April, 1923 the IRA Army Executive at last met, this time at Poulacapple near Mullinahone. Twelve were present. Frank Aiken became Chief of Staff in succession to Lynch and it was decided, with only one dissident, to negotiate for peace. A special Army Council consisting of four generals was appointed to make the final decision in conjunction with the Republican Cabinet. The four



chosen were Liam Pilkington, Frank Aiken, Tom Barry and Sean Hyde. They went to Dublin, where they held a consultation with President de Valera and those members of his Cabinet still available.

It was unanimously decided to authorise the President to make a public proclamation of their peace proposals and to order a cessation for the time being of aggressive action. The proclamation was issued on 27 April and was accompanied by an Army Order to all OCs, ordering the suspension of all offensive operations as from noon on Monday 30 April. Thus ended the Civil War.

President de Valera had been negotiating with President Cosgrave through Senators Andrew Jameson and James Douglas. These talks now broke down. While the Republicans were not prepared to surrender their arms, they were agreeable that effective control of them be secured pending a general election — on the lines previously proposed by the Archbishop of Cashel, Dr. Harty.

However, when these Republican proposals were rejected, nothing remained but to bring the war to a conclusion. This was done by a joint decision of the Republican Cabinet and the Army Council. On 24 May 1923 a cease fire order was issued, with an instruction to dump arms. This brought the Civil War formally to a close.

Editorial Footnote — It is proposed to present to the Co. Library, Thurles, the complete MS by Fr. Colmcille, of which the three instalments in this Journal (1990, 1991 & 1992) are only edited versions. It is also hoped to publish in the 1993 *Tipperary Historical Journal* a bibliography of all Fr. Colmcille's writings.

