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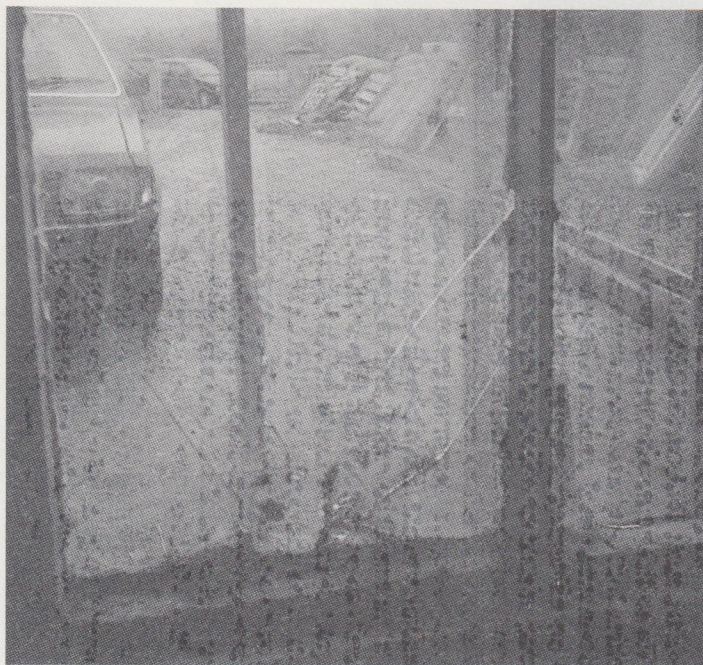
The death of Dinny Lacey

By Michael Neenan

In 1949 I was sent as a soil surveyor by the Department of Agriculture to Bansha as part of Fr. Hayes's Muintir na Tíre Parish Plan. The arrangement was that Ned Sheehy, the Parish Agent, would select farmers who were likely to be favourable to the idea, and who would be in a financial position to buy the fertilisers recommended by me.

In addition, it was necessary to get at least one farmer from every townland, and a line of farmers across the Glen of Aherlow. It took me most of a day to take the soil samples from one farm; the owner always accompanied me in order to identify the different fields.

Coming near the end of the survey I still had not got more than about one farm at the Glen end of the parish. I was directed to Pat Ryan of Cloghera. Pat was then in his 40s, and lived with his sister, and possibly his mother. He had an excellent farm of about 100 acres, located on a bye-road and about 100 metres from the mainroad and bounded on the north side by the river Aherlow.



The bullet-hole in the farmhouse window in Aherlow where Free State troops pursued Dinny Lacey.

We chatted as we went around the fields, and I detected that Pat was a little bit "anti-establishment" in his views. I represented a government agency, and one then headed by a strong Fine Gael man — James Dillon. Pat sounded me out on politics, and was a bit taken aback when I said I voted for whichever party had the best story on election day! He thought this a strange attitude for an educated man. Nevertheless we got on well, the more so as the day went on.

When we got to a field which was bounded by the river, I asked if this ever got flooded, and he said it did, maybe once or twice a year, usually in January or February. The banks of the river were about 3 metres high, so obviously the water reached that level when the river was in spate. In summer — as it was then — one could easily wade across it at some points.

As we came to one spot about 15 metres from the river, he took off his cap, blessed himself, and went silent for a few minutes. This intrigued me. Then he said:

"Do you know that 'tis at this very spot, Dinny Lacey was killed, may the Lord have mercy on him."

I hadn't heard of Dinny Lacey, so I had to play it as though I did.

"What sort of a man was he"? I asked.

"I didn't know him that well, but everyone says he was a fine type of man, and a very religious man. He used go to the First Fridays, even when he was on the run. The joke was that he'd get an awful land if there was no Hell there."

"How did he get killed?"

"Well, 'twas like this. Ours, being so far from anywhere, was considered a safe house. At the time I'm talking about, there were three I.R.A. men staying here, Dinny Lacey being one of them. 'Twas in the middle of February, and it was after raining for two days non-stop. The river was in full flood, well over the level of a man's head."

"While we were gone to Mass, a lorry of soldiers pulled up at the gate, and immediately started firing. You can see some of the bullet-marks on the window-sills still. The three I.R.A. men ran off in different directions, and the soldiers after them. Dinny, not knowing the area, ran on to this field; but of course, he couldn't cross the river, and he couldn't swim."

"I believe the soldiers caught up with him just here, and even though he threw down his gun, they shot him dead. I saw the blood in the field. The cows and the horses wouldn't come near it for weeks. Animals can smell blood. For a finish, my father had to let it go for hay that year."

"I know that the Black and Tans did some awful things, but I didn't think they'd go so far as to shoot a man dead, and they having him cornered against the river," said I.

"'Twas not the Black and Tans that shot him, but the Irish Free State Army."

Everything suddenly fell into place. I could see why Pat expected me to have firm views on political matters, just as he had. In writing up my map, I put a little cross on the field, and marked it "Dinny Lacey's field". I felt that the name would identify it as long as there were farmers in the Glen.