

‘Supernatural Manifestations, Accompanied by Cures’

– the phenomenon of the ‘Templemore miracles’, 1920.

by John Reynolds

Introduction.

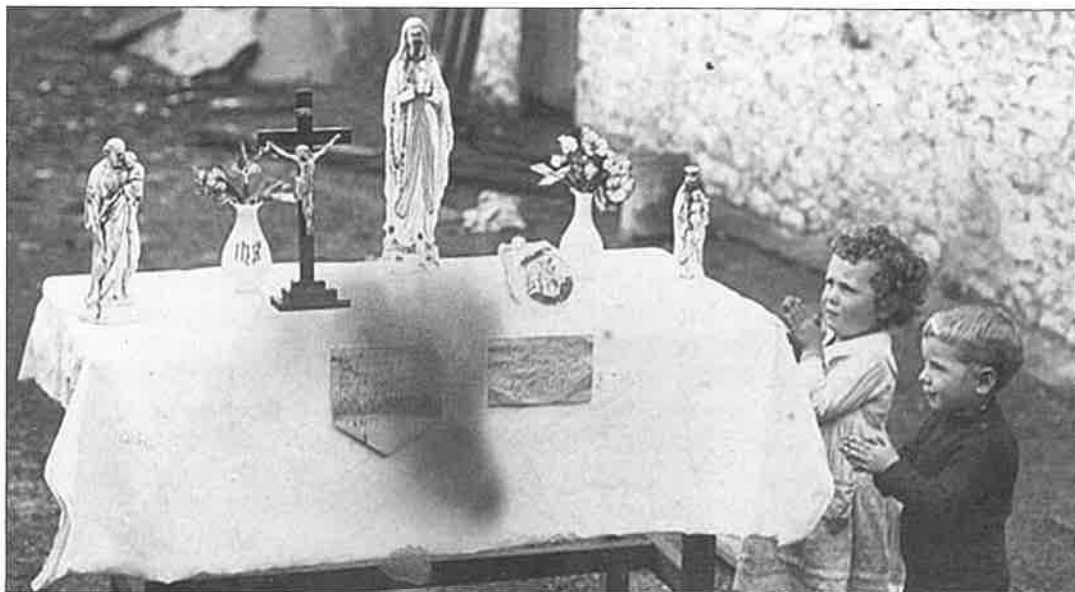
On 16 August 1920, District Inspector William Harding Wilson of the Royal Irish Constabulary was shot dead in Templemore by an IRA party consisting of Commandant Paddy Kinnane, Jimmy Leahy, ‘big’ Jim Stapleton, John Fahy and Jack Ryan. Reporting the death of Wilson to Dublin Castle, County Inspector Dunlop stated that ‘his fearless manner in dealing with Sinn Féin was the cause of his death’.¹ Later that night ‘wild scenes were witnessed’ in the town as the military engaged in reprisals. Templemore town hall was burned to the ground as were the creameries at Castleiney, Loughmore and Killea, houses were attacked, and shops were looted.² The burning of the town hall resulted in the deaths of two members of the Northamptonshire Regiment, Captain Sidney Herbert Beattie M.C., and Lance Corporal H.J Fuggle. The regiment was based at Richmond Barracks (now the Garda Síochána College), and the regimental diary stated that Beattie ‘died of accidental injuries received at Templemore’, and Fuggle ‘accidentally burnt to death’.³ While the *Irish Times* reported that Beattie had entered the burning town hall to ‘rescue a trapped civilian with complete disregard for his own safety’,⁴ the *Tipperary Star* reported that the military and Black and Tans had taken petrol at gunpoint from Moynan’s garage and used it to set fire to several premises. It was also reported that when the town hall was set ablaze, ‘a cheer was given and a voice shouted ‘Sinn Féiners all lie down’.⁵ Immediately after the deaths of Beattie and Fuggle, the first reports of ‘supernatural manifestations, accompanied by cures’ occurring in the area appeared in local and national newspapers.⁶

Attention focused on Templemore and a cottage in the townland of Curraheen near Gortagarry. It was reported that religious statues in the Templemore premises of newsagent Thomas Dwan, the adjacent RIC barracks and also the house of Thomas Dwan’s sister-in-law, Miss Maher at Curraheen, were shedding tears of blood. James Walsh, a sixteen year old farm labourer, from Bouladuff, who was employed by Miss Maher and lived in the cottage alleged that he was experiencing Marian apparitions, and also that a ‘holy well’ had appeared in the floor of his bedroom. The *Tipperary Star* reported that ‘after the outburst on Monday night some of the statues from which blood had been oozing were taken by Walsh to Templemore, and it is believed that it was this that saved the town from destruction’.⁷ The *Limerick Leader* reported that ‘prominent townsmen assembled around the bleeding statues and offered prayers aloud, thanking God that the town was saved on Monday night, and that none of the inoffensive people of Templemore suffered any casualties’.⁸ As the Black and Tans and military had sworn to sack the town and ‘make the Catholics pay for it’,⁹ many local people believed that divine intervention had taken place to prevent the town being completely destroyed in revenge for the death of DI Wilson, and that ‘our Lady had

saved Templemore.⁹ On 31 August 1920, County Inspector Dunlop reported the incident to Dublin Castle;

On 20th inst. miraculous apparitions are alleged to have appeared in Templemore and Curraheen. Sacred statues belonging to a man named Walsh and a constable stationed at Templemore are alleged to have begun to bleed, and several miraculous cures are said to have taken place.¹¹

Thomas Wimsey of Templemore barracks was the constable referred to and *The Tipperary Star* reported that the statue had been given to Wimsey by James Walsh several weeks earlier, and was kept in his room at the barracks. Dunlop reported that a pilgrimage to Templemore had started from all parts of Ireland, with many thousands thronging daily into the town.¹² By 4 September upwards of 15,000 persons per day were making the pilgrimage to Templemore and then onwards to Curraheen. This influx undoubtedly brought an economic windfall to the area 'which must have done better than many a seaside town in Ireland this year'.¹³



Dunlop had the statue removed from the barracks and placed with other statues on an improvised altar which had been erected in the yard beside Dwan's shop. This followed an incident during which the barracks was surrounded by a large crowd of pilgrims anxious to see Wimsey's bleeding statue.¹⁴ Many people entered the premises and had to be forcibly removed by the police. *The Tipperary Star* reported that Wimsey left the RIC to join a religious order.¹⁵ Dunlop reported that the alleged miracles were having a positive effect on the locality, describing the conduct of the large crowds as 'exemplary', while newspapers renamed Templemore as Pilgrimville or Pilgrimstown. To cater for the thousands of pilgrims categorised by newspapers as 'the halt, the maim and the blind',¹⁶ additional trains originating from Kingsbridge station in Dublin were added to the normal schedule. Reverend P. Collier, a correspondent for *The Catholic Times* visited Templemore on 23 August and wrote that his train from Dublin was packed with pilgrims. He estimated that 6,000 to 8,000 people were at Dwan's, many of them having been there overnight. He saw

four statues, each blood trickling down the face, neck, breasts and body.¹⁷

The alleged visionary, James Walsh, was aged seventeen at the time of these events and variously described as a 'simple-mannered youth'¹⁸ and also a 'saint if ever there was one'.¹⁹ He told journalists that he had spent a period of time in the Cistercian Monastery in Roscrea as a novice, leaving because of ill health, but intended 'to enter a religious order'.²⁰ Walsh became an instant celebrity and, within days, advertising had appeared in newspapers offering 'photographs of the boy to whom the blessed virgin appeared' for sale.²¹ Pilgrims visiting Templemore travelled on to Maher's cottage at Curraheen where Walsh lived which was regarded as much a place of pilgrimage as the house in Templemore because of the reported existence of the holy well in the floor of his bedroom.²² The throng of pilgrims prompted one elderly visitor to make an analogy with the Alaskan gold rush of 1897-98, remarking that 't'was easier to get from Skagway to the Klondike' than from Templemore to Curraheen.²³ Walsh told journalists that he had first started to experience Marian apparitions on 14 August 1920 and that religious statues in his bedroom subsequently began to move and shed tears of blood. Acting on instructions from the Virgin Mary Walsh dug a heart-shaped hole in his bedroom floor from which a holy well appeared, 'producing a great volume of water'.²⁴ As reports of the apparitions and miracles spread so did the number of pilgrims, with many people claiming to have been healed either by direct contact with Walsh or by exposure to the bleeding statues. Some visitors were not convinced of the veracity of the Templemore apparitions however, and one journalist wrote that he had come 'to see a miracle and saw one. It was not a miracle of bleeding statues but of pathetic belief'.²⁵ *The Limerick Leader* reported the case of former soldier Martin Monahan, the first person claiming to have been cured by Walsh. Monahan had spent three years in the military hospital at Richmond Barracks after being crippled by shrapnel during the Great War. He claimed to have entered Dwan's yard on crutches but left 'with full use of his limbs'²⁶ after Walsh had touched his legs with one of the statues.

Local curate, Reverend John O'Neill, commented that knowing Monahan, he was satisfied that the cure effected on him was genuine, as were the reported cures of Mrs. Campion of blindness, and Helena Crowe of paralysis.²⁷ Other well-publicised cases included those of Miss Guerin of Limerick and Cornelius Gavin, also of Limerick, who were allegedly cured of 'paralysis' and 'acute hip disease' respectively. Despite the influx of pilgrims and the reported cures, the official position of the Catholic Church towards events in Templemore and Curraheen was one of 'extreme reserve'.²⁸

The Catholic Church and the Templemore miracles

At the height of the fervour which surrounded the Templemore miracles, Bishop Fogarty of Limerick warned mass goers that 'they should restrain their judgement and not allow themselves to be carried away by excitement or popular rumour'.²⁹ The parish priest of Templemore, Reverend Kiely, refused to visit the statues, expressing the opinion that great caution should be exercised.³⁰ IRA commander, Jimmy Leahy, stated that most of the older clergy treated the whole affair with caution, but some younger priests appeared to look 'upon Curraheen as another Lourdes, and James Walsh as a saint'.³¹ Walsh began to travel to other towns in the company of a party of clergy, visiting Mount Mellary and then Cashel, where he stayed overnight in the presbytery on 10 September 1920 as guest of the parish priest, Monsignor Innocent Ryan.

The Irish Times reported that statues and a crucifix in the presbytery in Cashel had begun to bleed when touched by James Walsh,³²⁸ and, as the news spread, 'a piteous and clamorous crowd of invalids'³³ arrived at the presbytery and requested that they be allowed to see and touch the statues, which were on display outside the building. Monsignor Ryan wrote to *The Irish Times* in an attempt to stem the flow of pilgrims and to prevent events similar to those occurring at Templemore and Curraheen taking place in Cashel. In a letter to the editor he cautioned the public not to put their faith in statues or crucifixes, but in the Blessed Sacrament. He asked the editor 'for space to tell the public that there are no bleeding statues or crucifixes here for anyone to see'.³⁴ Many members of the clergy visited Templemore and Curraheen as pilgrims, including Doctor Patrick Clune, Archbishop of Perth.



The IRA and the miracles

When the miracles began the local IRA were as interested and intrigued as everyone else in the area at the events that were taking place. Many volunteers were staunch Catholics with a particular devotion to the Virgin Mary and also to the rosary. For example, on 2 June 1921 an ambush took place at Modreeney near Borrisokane in north Tipperary during which four RIC constables were killed. While the ambush was taking place Paddy Kennedy, IRA officer commanding was seen attacking the police with a shotgun at close range while his rosary beads hung around his neck.³⁵

Reporting the Templemore miracles to IRA GHQ, Edward McGrath, Vice Commandant of No. 2 Tipperary Brigade, stated that the town was packed with 'pilgrims, beggars, stallholders and undesirables. The police and military had disappeared off the streets and the IRA had taken over. They controlled traffic, introduced parking and restored order'.³⁶ It was

as if a truce or understanding had been reached between the IRA and the military and police due to the extraordinary circumstances which existed in the area at that time. IRA men acted as stewards and marshals but did not appear on the streets in uniform, but the absence of the military and police from the streets was used by them to reconnoitre potential targets and suitable locations for future ambushes. Jimmy Leahy, in his capacity as IRA Brigade officer commanding decided to impose a levy of 2/6d per day on all motor cars bringing pilgrims from Templemore to the holy well at Curaheen. Ostensibly the levy was imposed to pay for repairs to local roads which had been badly damaged by the throngs of pilgrims, and to pay the expenses of IRA men involved in traffic and crowd control duty.

The imposition of the levy caused an outcry. Count O'Byrne, Sinn Féin TD and chairman of north Tipperary County Council, met Leahy and other senior IRA commanders. The Count pointed out that the levy was highly irregular. Leahy replied that 'everything had to be irregular to deal with the situation that had arisen'.³⁷ The Count suggested that the council should take over the collection of the levy. Leahy refused, saying that he intended to buy arms and ammunition with any balance left over after deducting the Volunteers' expenses.³⁸ Pilgrims were reported to be 'loud in their praise of the 'splendid men of Óglaigh na hÉireann'³⁹ who maintained order and also prevented excessive profiteering by shop-keepers, caterers and hoteliers. Such profiteering was stringently dealt with by the IRA who imposed a scale of charges after 'due enquiry, deliberation and consideration of the abnormal conditions prevailing'.⁴⁰ One newspaper report detailed the IRA court-martial of a driver from Cork who had charged pilgrims six pounds instead of the normal thirty shillings fare to transport them to the holy well at Curraheen.⁴¹

Collection boxes on behalf of the IRA and Cumann na mBan were placed along the pilgrimage route, and this provided a substantial windfall for the Brigade, a total of £1500 having been contributed by pilgrims.⁴² This money was subsequently delivered to the Brigade quartermaster and went towards the purchase of arms and ammunition. Several days after the miracles began, Leahy and other Brigade officers arranged a private interrogation of James Walsh. They had started to view the 'whole business with incredulity',⁴³ and were also seriously concerned that volunteer discipline was being compromised. Pilgrims had begun to lavishly tip the IRA men with the result that some volunteers who had previously been abstemious and enthusiastic 'took to drink and began to forget that they were engaged in a life and death struggle for the country's freedom'.⁴⁴

A meeting took place in Dwan's house between Walsh and an IRA delegation led by Jimmy Leahy. Walsh told Leahy that when he had questioned the apparition, the Virgin Mary had indicated her approval of guerrilla tactics, including the shooting of the Black and Tans and RIC, and wished to see the campaign intensified. Leahy and the others found it difficult 'to keep a straight face' and concluded that Walsh was either 'mentally abnormal or a hypocrite'.⁴⁵ Following the meeting the IRA determined that decisive action should be taken to halt the influx of pilgrims and bring the Templemore miracles to an end. Leahy visited Canon M.K. Ryan in Thurles and requested that the apparitions and cures be denounced from the pulpit, thereby deterring pilgrims from travelling to Templemore and Curraheen. Leahy did not receive a smooth reception from Canon Ryan, who appeared unimpressed by what Leahy had said.⁴⁶ Leahy contacted Michael Collins and expressed his

concern about the situation in Templemore and Curraheen and the detrimental effect it was having on volunteer discipline in the area. Collins ordered Dan Breen to contact 'the fellow who operates the bleeding statue' and interview him, to which Breen reluctantly agreed.⁴⁷

Walsh was taken to O'Neill's pub in Dublin, which was known as a safe haven for IRA men, and interrogated by Breen, while Collins waited in the next room. While Walsh was waiting to see Breen, some of the more devout IRA members present insisted on kissing his coat and addressing him as 'Saint'. Commandant Dinny Lacey requested of Walsh that the next time he 'met the Blessed Virgin Mary, be sure to insist on nothing less than a republic.'⁴⁸ Breen interrogated Walsh for fifteen minutes and concluded that 'he was a fake'⁴⁹ or even possibly a spy. Phil Shanahan, who owned a Dublin pub frequented by Tipperary IRA members was asked by Breen to drive the visionary back to Templemore and that was the last Breen saw of the 'failure Walsh'.⁵⁰ On his return, Shanahan offered Breen water from the holy well at Curraheen to drink, but Breen declined the offer. Michael Collins was briefed by Breen about his interview with Walsh and gave his opinion that the apparitions and miracles were not genuine, to which Collins sarcastically replied, 'one can't take any notice of what you say Breen, because you have no religion'.⁵¹

The end of the miracles

The Catholic Church had rebuffed the IRA by refusing to condemn the miracles, so Michael Collins was contacted directly to ensure that the hysteria surrounding Jimmy Walsh and his 'miracles' would come to end. Action was also taken to resume the war in earnest after the informal ceasefire which had lasted for several weeks. On 29 September 1920 an ambush took place at Kiloskehan near to Goldings Cross RIC barracks. Members of the Borrisoleigh IRA company under the command of 'big' Jim Stapleton attacked a group of RIC men returning to barracks. The barracks was on the 'pilgrimage route' between Templemore and Curraheen, and the intention of the ambush was to elicit a reprisal from the military and police which would have the effect of deterring pilgrims from travelling to the area. Constables Noonan and Flood were killed and two others wounded. After the ambush a party of pilgrims was stopped and forced to complete their journey with the 'dead bodies of the two policemen thrown across their knees in the car'.⁵² As the IRA had intended, the ambush brought a substantial number of military and police reinforcements to the area who indulged in a 'reign of terror by indulging in indiscriminate firing into houses and across fields'.⁵³

The Northamptonshire Regiment went to the 'holy well' at Curraheen and Dwan's yard in Templemore where they removed crutches and other items left behind by pilgrims. Some soldiers decorated themselves with religious artefacts while others feigned lameness, and began using the crutches, parading around the streets in mockery of the miracles. Rumours spread like wildfire that Templemore would be burned to the ground as a reprisal for the Kiloskehan ambush and pilgrims, stall-holders and tramps all made a hasty exit. Within twenty-four hours normal conditions prevailed in the town once more. The abnormal conditions brought about by 'Walsh and his miracles had lasted for three weeks'.⁵⁴

Seán Harling, a Commandant in the second battalion of the Dublin Brigade, Fianna Éireann worked as a courier for Dáil Éireann from 1919-21. Just after the end of the Templemore miracles, Michael Collins instructed him to travel to Tipperary and return with one of the 'bleeding statues' as he had received complaints from the Catholic clergy that

IRA members had engineered a religious statue which would bleed at specific times. Harling recalled that when he returned to Dublin Michael Collins examined the statue at length, and then:

took hold of the statue and banged it off the side of the desk, and of course out fell the works of the alarm clock.' I knew it', he says. So that was the end of the bleeding statue'⁵⁵

The mechanism of an alarm clock had been concealed inside the statue, which was connected to fountain pen inserts containing a mixture of sheep's blood and water. When the clock mechanism struck a certain time it would send a spurt of blood through the statue's heart giving the impression that the statue was bleeding.

Shortly after the phenomenon of the Templemore miracles had ended, local people heard that James Walsh had left for Australia. Having been labelled as a possible spy by Dan Breen, he was in grave danger of execution by the IRA, but many Irish people believed that he was indeed a genuine Marian visionary. It seems that his rapid emigration to Australia may not only have saved his life, but also solved a major problem for the IRA in what to do with him. Walsh never returned to Templemore, and local people who enquired about him were told that he had died in Australia. This had the effect of preventing awkward questions being asked, but the reality of his life in Australia is equally as fascinating as the life he had in Ireland. After emigrating he altered his name, got married in 1932 and had children. However, later in life his true identity was revealed which brought profound consequences. He was dismissed from his job as a lay teacher at the behest of the Catholic Church and despite this setback, he later tried unsuccessfully to join a religious order. It seems that until his death in 1977, Jimmy Walsh was haunted by his Templemore past and religious beliefs.

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