

Bill Ryan of Laha

The Last Survivor of the Tipperary Team,

21 November 1920

By Donal J. O'Regan

While many will recall the name of Michael Hogan of Grangemockler, Co. Tipperary, the Tipperary goalkeeper who was fatally injured by British Crown forces on the afternoon of Sunday 21 November 1920, few will note that of Bill Ryan of Laha, who survived that fateful day and became the last survivor of the Tipperary football team which played the Dublin team on that fateful day in 1920.

On the previous night Hogan and Ryan had shared a room in Phil Shanahan's public house not far from Croke Park, enjoying a good night's sleep in preparation for the day that lay ahead. Both were members of the GAA and both were also IRA members engaged in a fight with the British for the cause of Irish independence.

As we commemorate the centenary of his event, it is worth noting the transcript of an interview which this writer carried out with the late Bill Ryan in his farm house in Castleiney, Templemore in 1988. At that time Ryan was aged 95 but with perfect recollection of the events which had occurred nearly seventy years before that time.

On the morning of Sunday 21 November 1920, the so called "twelve apostles" working for Michael Collins, Minister for Finance in the First Dáil Éireann and Director of Military Intelligence shot dead fourteen British special undercover agents who were closing in on Collins's intelligence network. It was a case of "getting rid of them before they got us". That morning Dick MacKee, Commandant of the Dublin Brigade of the IRA and his Vice Commandant Peadar Clancy were abducted by British forces along with an innocent young man, Conor Clune who happened to be a nephew of the Archbishop of Perth. On learning of the killings orchestrated by Collins's men that morning, the three were tortured and killed.

But worse was to come. Following the 3.00pm throw-in in that day's challenge match between Tipperary and Dublin, Crossley tenders manned by Auxiliaries and Black and Tans invaded the playing field and began to fire indiscriminately at the players and into the crowd. Michael Hogan, the Co. Tipperary Goalkeeper from Grangemockler, who was also an active member of the Third Tipperary Brigade Old IRA, died instantly. Thirteen were killed in all but Bill Ryan survived.



Bill Ryan started playing senior football with Castleiney in 1911 and the club reached the mid final that year only to be beaten by Templeuohy. In 1914 Castleiney joined with Templeuohy and won the county senior football final, the first county senior football title to come to the mid division. In 1915 the team again went to the county decider but were defeated by Nenagh. He joined Templemore in 1922 and captured a county final in 1925. Bill made a national "name" for himself at inter county level and his first game for Tipperary was a tournament tie against Cork on March 14th 1915. The 1920 championship, completed in 1922, brought the greatest honour to Bill when Tipperary defeated Dublin by 1-6 to 1-2 in the All-Ireland Final. He won three Munster senior football medals in 1918, 1920 and 1922. He figured on the team that played Dublin in a tournament at Croke Park on November 20th 1920, an event that became known as Bloody Sunday. Ten minutes into the game the pitch was invaded by the Black and Tans, with thirteen people being killed, including Tipperary's Mick Hogan from Grangemockler. Bill started club hurling with Clonmore in 1918 and played with Templeuohy in 1920. He won a mid senior hurling medal with Killea Castleiney in 1928 and won junior medals with the same club in 1925 and with Templetrouhy in 1923.

*Bill Ryan of Laha (Photograph and accompanying text courtesy of Martin Bourke from **Mid Tipperary GAA 1884-2007 A Photographic History**, Vol. 2, p. 15.)*

He dived for cover and saw all around him go red. On getting up he was approached by a young British army officer who informed him that he was free to go. Seeing that he was freezing, the courteous British officer offered a young Bill Ryan his top coat which he proceeded to wear as he calmly exited the field. At the exit, Ryan was stopped by a Black and Tan who ordered him back onto the field at bayonet point. 'Who told you that you could go?' the Black-and-Tan snapped. 'That young Officer told me that I was free to go' Ryan replied. On arriving back onto the field the two came across the young British army Second Lieutenant who confirmed to the satisfaction of all that Ryan was free to go. Whereupon a young Bill Ryan walked off the field to freedom.

Little did the British officer realise that Ryan was a Second Lieutenant in the Castleiney Battalion of the Mid Tipperary Brigade of the IRA headed up by Commandant James Leahy. Seán Scott was the Castleiney Battalion Commander. Had this been evident Ryan's life might not have been spared and he could at least expect to have been interned.

This account, as recalled by the late Bill Ryan who died two years after I interviewed him at the age of ninety seven, affords an insight of humanity in the midst of a war filled with violence. The young British officer comes across, from the words of the late Bill Ryan, as a gentleman in the truest sense of the word with his display of courtesy and chivalry being evident to the listener.

Bill Ryan appeared as a somewhat quiet spoken if not shy man. He does not feature in the Bureau of Military History Witness Statements and neither does he merit a mention in Seán Hogan's epic work *The Black and Tans In North Tipperary- Policing, Revolution and War 1913 -1922*. Neither have I been able to access him in the Military Pension Records. Without the aforesaid interview and a similar interview carried out by the late John J. Hassett he would be almost lost to history.

This writer also wishes to extend his thanks to Kevin O'Connell, Bill Ryan's grandson for corroborating in private conversation the above information.