

Cumann na mBan in Tipperary: the story of Mary O'Dwyer (1902-2003) of Dualla

By Oisín Ó Síocháin

Introduction

The role that women played during the revolutionary period in Ireland has long been underestimated. This truth is no different in county Tipperary, where the tenacious dedication of several Cumann na mBan volunteers has been sometimes cast aside to make room for the undoubtedly vital role played by the men. The woman whose story will be told here is one of the women in Tipperary who served as the glue that kept the IRA operating efficiently during the War of Independence and Civil War. It would be wrong to omit, however, that Mary O'Dwyer was quite exceptional. She surpassed the ordinary level of work done by Cumann na mBan members, so much so that Dan Breen, author of *My Fight for Irish Freedom* and later a Fianna Fáil TD, said that he "would class her more a volunteer than a member of Cumann na mBan".¹



Fig. 1: Mary O'Dwyer

Later in her life, Mary "was reluctant to talk very much about"² her activities during her time in Cumann na mBan. She often understated her role and it is only in recent years, with the release of Bureau of Military History documents, that the full extent of her involvement has been revealed. As a result, she has recently been described as "the most extraordinary of the South Tipperary members of Cumann na mBan".³ The purpose of this article is to explore Mary O'Dwyer's role in the War of Independence in south Tipperary and her political interests in later life.

Early Life

Mary O'Dwyer was born Mary Breen, and married Ned O'Dwyer. She was born on 13 April 1902 in Coleraine, near Dualla, in south Tipperary. John Breen, her father, worked as an agricultural labourer, and he was married to Johanna Colville. Mary was



Fig. 2: The house in Coleraine where Mary O'Dwyer was raised. (Photo: Oisín Sheehan, 2016)

one of six children. She had one older brother, Philip, three older sisters, Honoria,⁴ Dorothy and Annie, and one younger sister, Josie.⁵ They lived in a small, two-roomed '2nd class'⁶ house which still survives, though it has been unoccupied for many years (see Fig. 2).

Early political activities

At the age of sixteen, Mary was an active Sinn Féin canvasser in the 1918 general election in the Tipperary East constituency. She "took part in the election activities [and] gave out literature".⁷ The canvassers were not always welcome, and Mary used to recall that she was 'chased with pitchforks' from some places.⁸ The candidate in this constituency was Piersie McCan. He was born in Co. Wexford and was the son of a wealthy land agent. Raised at Ballyowen House, just outside Dualla, he was a well-off and 'extensive farmer'.⁹ He was heavily involved in the republican movement, and was a founder of the Dualla branch of the Irish Volunteers in 1914.¹⁰ He was imprisoned twice. Firstly, after the rising in 1916 he was interned, but was released at the end of the year when "his return to Dualla was made the occasion for a great public demonstration of welcome to him".¹¹ Then, in May 1918, he was arrested under the German Plot and was incarcerated in Gloucester Jail.¹² Despite the fact that he was a prisoner at the time of the election, December 1918, he won by a large majority with over 60% of the vote. The following March he died, while still in prison, of influenza (of which there was an outburst in England at the time). Cathal Brugha, in an address to Dáil Éireann, said that McCan was "the first man of our body to die for Ireland".¹³ Brugha gave the oration at his funeral in Dualla¹⁴ (sometimes called 'the patriot village'),¹⁵ which thousands reportedly attended, including Michael Collins and Harry Boland. (see Fig. 3) It is quite probable that Mary O'Dwyer's interest in republicanism stemmed from this local connection with Piersie McCan and the rising Sinn Féin movement. It also highly likely that McCan's funeral (which she surely attended, or at least heard about), further fuelled her republicanism and radicalised her further.



Fig. 3: Michael Collins and Harry Boland carrying Piersie McCan's coffin, 1919.

War of Independence

Early the following year, 1920, aged eighteen, Mary O'Dwyer joined Cumann na mBan in the village of Moyglass. She was promoted to Captain of E Company, 7th Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade, soon after in March of 1920.¹⁶ This Brigade, which covered all of south Tipperary, was one of the most effective and active units throughout the country, both during the War of Independence and Civil War. It was by this Brigade that the opening shots of the War of Independence were fired, in Soloheadbeg. Tipperary was also one of the first counties to be put under martial law, mainly as a consequence of the actions of the 3rd Brigade. Mary was most active in the 7th (Moyglass, Kilenale, Drangan, Cloneen), 2nd (Dualla, Cashel) and 1st (Fethard, Rosegreen) Battalion areas. As captain, there were usually up to ten/twelve in her company, and therefore under her authority. However, "during the Black and Tan period" that reduced to three or four.¹⁷

None of Mary O'Dwyer's family was involved in republican activities. In fact, she ignored advice not to get involved. Harry Bushe, then quartermaster of the 7th Battalion, later wrote that as she sat in Dualla church one morning the parish priest "advised all the local girls not to have any sympathy with the IRA, [but] she was one of the girls who stood by us".¹⁸ Despite the parish priest's advice, she remained a member of Cumann na mBan and, in Bushe's opinion, became "the most active member of the Cumann na mBan in the 7th Battalion area".¹⁹ Clearly, she was more active than the average Cumann na mBan member and this involved operations that women would not normally have taken part in. In the words of Dan Breen, "She took big risks during the fighting ... all the risks of a volunteer".²⁰

Regular Cumann na mBan Activities

The general duties of Cumann na mBan members involved cooking for IRA men, first aid, providing shelter for those who were 'on the run', passing messages, and sometimes smuggling and hiding arms and ammunition. Mary O'Dwyer helped out considerably in her locality with duties such as these and the following is a summary of them.

Sometimes, seven or eight volunteers would stay the night at her house, up to three times a week. Volunteers also called during the day or night for food or replacement clothing. She also arranged ointment and sulphur baths for men with "the itch",²¹ which was presumably scabies that would have been a common condition amongst members of flying columns who may have been staying in trenches at night. Mary also guided the volunteers across the country to meet up with other members of the IRA.²² These activities are listed in the Pension Application under 'Catering', which, despite being dangerous, were considered as being routine.

Mary O'Dwyer was also engaged in arms smuggling and intelligence work. She kept rifles, revolvers, mills bombs and ammunition "off and on", and these were hidden in the hayshed, and in the thatch of the house.²³ As captain of the company she had a quartermaster-like role in that she had charge over the distribution of the arms, and taking them back when their purpose was fulfilled. She transported arms over short distances (and also longer distances, sometimes up to seven miles), which was usually done by foot, bicycle or donkey and cart. Carrying dispatches was another job she carried out

frequently, bringing them to and from Comdt. Geraldine Simpson, Comdt. Downey and Comdt. Walsh. She treated Seán Hayes (later to become a Fianna Fáil TD and Senator) at her house, when his arm was wounded.²⁴

Mary O'Dwyer's intelligence gathering was her most interesting work, two examples of which (the Newtown Ambush and the capture and execution of an alleged spy) will be examined in more detail below. She frequently went into Cashel to watch "the movements of the RIC. ... and anything she heard or saw was reported to the IRA officers."²⁵ On one occasion, she provided the IRA with intelligence on the movements of a post van, which they subsequently raided successfully. She claimed that this turned out to be very important, as there were letters of correspondence in the mail van which would have led to the capture and death of seven or eight volunteers. IRA raids on mail vans were common, and often led to the acquisition of important information on spies, informers and collaborators with British forces. On one occasion, there were several volunteers staying in her house, and she saw British soldiers approaching the house. She got all of the volunteers out just in time.

On 18 December 1920, James Looby of the Dualla Company was arrested and shot by British forces. The following night, his brother Laurence, was shot on the roadside by soldiers.²⁶ After these killings there was a lot of action, a heightened military presence, and huge anger in Dualla and surrounding areas. Mary O'Dwyer scouted at Dualla at this time and reported the movements of British forces to the IRA. This type of work was common amongst Cumann na mBan women, and would have been considered routine. In the following sections of the article, it will be shown that Mary O'Dwyer also carried out actions which certainly distinguish her from a lot of other Cumann na mBan members. That said, it would be wrong to belittle and underestimate the importance of this work. The IRA would certainly not have been capable of bringing the British Empire to a standstill if it was not for these intelligence gatherers, nurses, smugglers and rebellious women. The dangerous nature of the work of Cumann na mBan women also should not be underestimated. If caught, whether it be carrying guns and ammunition, or hiding volunteers in their houses, the 'Black and Tans' and Auxiliaries in particular would have dealt with them severely; house burnings, arrests and maltreatment were all common methods of punishment. Mary O'Dwyer and other Cumann na mBan women knew the risks, and they took them.

The Newtown Ambush

The first major military event that involved Mary O'Dwyer was the Newtown ambush. This was planned at a meeting of the 7th Battalion that was held in Moyglass on 1 July 1920.²⁷ A decision was made to ambush an RIC patrol on its way back to the station in Ballinure from Cashel.²⁸ The local battalion had learned from intelligence work done by Mary O'Dwyer, under the orders of then Commandant Tommy Donovan, that on the second day of each month the patrol made the seven mile cycle from Ballinure barracks to Cashel to collect its pay.²⁹ The decision was made at this meeting to ambush the patrol on their return journey at Newtown crossroads, which is midway between Ballinure and Cashel. Comdt. Donovan was to lead the ambush, with volunteers from the 7th Battalion.³⁰ The patrol was expected to consist of five or six RIC men.³¹

The next morning, 2 July, Comdt. Donovan called to Capt. Paul Mulcahy (of the Dualla company), and asked him to join in the action. Mulcahy suggested bringing some more volunteers, but Donovan thought five or six would suffice.³² To carry out the attack, the ambush party (which consisted of Comdt. Tommy Donovan, Capt. Paul Mulcahy, Capt. Seán Hayes, Seán Walshe, Michael Burke and Joseph Ormond), needed to borrow arms from the Fethard Company. Joseph Ormond brought weapons, comprising three revolvers, two or three shotguns and a mauser rifle to them, and he stayed for the ambush.³³ Each volunteer had five or six rounds of ammunition.³⁴ Each member of the RIC patrol carried a revolver. According to the BMH witness statements of Mulcahy, Walshe and Tierney,³⁵ the Volunteers' plan was to call on the RIC to "Halt and put up your hands",³⁶ and to only open fire if they were fired on. Mulcahy wrote 'We did not seriously consider the fact that they might offer resistance',³⁷ but this is exactly what happened.

The ambush party took up its position behind a small wall at Newtown Cross, (see Fig. 4). This was the ideal place for an ambush, as the road slightly rises towards the crossroads so that the volunteers would be looking downslope at the RIC. At approximately 4:30 pm, as expected, the patrol arrived. There seems to be contradiction between the volunteers' statements as to the layout of the patrol when it came into sight. Mulcahy says that they were surprised at the fact that it was spread out over eighty to ninety metres, and that "This was a contingency for which we were not prepared, nor had we sufficient men to extend out and cover all the RIC men at the same time".³⁸ However, Seán Walshe says that they were cycling in pairs, but does not say that the IRA were surprised. In fact, he says that "This was the way we expected them to come".³⁹ It seems odd that a detail of such importance is conflicting in these memoirs. There is also uncertainty as to the



Fig. 4: Newtown Cross. The wall on the left shows where the volunteers hid. The RIC patrol came from around the bend seen in the photo. (Photo: Oisín Sheehan, 2016)

number of men in the patrol – according to Mulcahy there were seven, Walshe recorded that there were six, but according to the contemporary newspaper accounts there were only four.⁴⁰ John Reynolds, who has published a study of RIC fatalities in Country Tipperary, concluded that there were six in the patrol.⁴¹ Only four can be identified from the newspaper accounts and the BMH statements, and these are Sgt. Robert Tobin, Const. Brady, Const. John Moloney and Const. David Ross (a Scottish Auxiliary). It would seem most likely, based on the former accounts, that there were only four policemen in the patrol. The witness statements of the IRA men, on which Reynolds based his account of this ambush, were written over thirty-five years after this ambush. Is it likely that the exact number of policemen was remembered correctly? On the other hand, the newspaper accounts were published only days after this incident, and their knowledge most likely came from the RIC who would have known perfectly well how many people were in its patrol.

The probable details of what happened at the ambush, based on both the witness statements and the newspaper coverage, despite several contradictions within them, are proposed below. When the 'ginger-haired Black and Tan',⁴² i.e. Const. Ross, came opposite to Mulcahy, the latter called on the former to stop. Ross immediately got off his bicycle, shouting "Don't shoot", and put up his hands. Mulcahy stayed with him. Meanwhile, Comdt. Donovan and

Michael Burke had jumped over the wall, when, apparently, they were fired on by Sgt. Tobin. This is disputed by the RIC, who, at the Inquest, claimed that the IRA fired first.⁴³ Tobin and Brady were "seeking cover in the ditches",⁴⁴ and, in retaliation to Tobin's fire, both Donovan and Burke fired simultaneously.⁴⁵ Sgt. Robert Tobin, aged 42, with a wife and six children,⁴⁶ was shot in the region of the heart and killed. It appears that he was either in, or very near to, the roadside ditch when he died, as Mulcahy writes that '[Const.] Brady was then lying in the ditch beside the dead sergeant'.⁴⁷

It appears that after Tobin was shot the only RIC man who was still firing was Const. Brady. Donovan and Mulcahy tried to move down the road under the cover of the ditch, in order to get behind the other RIC men, but they then saw Brady 'cycling furiously' back towards Dualla. Both Mulcahy and Donovan fired at him, and it was Donovan's second shot which wounded him in the lower abdomen. Despite this, Brady continued to cycle until he reached Dualla, where he collapsed outside Dunphy's pub. At this point two more volunteers, Joseph Nagle and Paddy Loughlin, had arrived on the scene of the ambush. Donovan ordered Nagle to follow Brady and to shoot him. However, 'as a crowd of people had collected around him by the time Joe Nagle arrived there, [Nagle] refrained from carrying out Donovan's order'.⁴⁸

Back at the scene of the ambush, the remaining constables surrendered. The volunteers took their weapons, ammunition, bicycles (and presumably their pay as it was for this

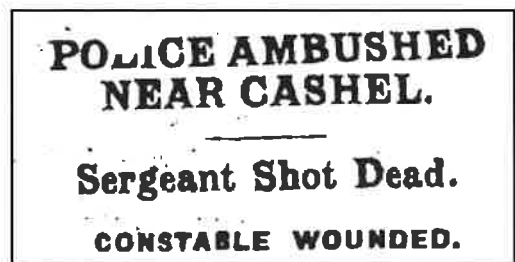


Fig. 5: A headline about the Newtown ambush in *The Liberator*, on the 3rd of July 1920.

they had gone into Cashel), and then allowed them continue on their way to Ballinure on foot. The volunteers then left the scene, cycling on the RIC's bicycles.⁴⁹ Mary O'Dwyer took the weapons from the volunteers, and scouted the roads for them to make sure that they were safe. Paul Mulcahy and Paddy Loughlin went "on the run" after this event.⁵⁰

The released constables made their way to Ballinure where they raised the alarm. The Cork Examiner reported that the "... military and police proceeded to the scene and a District Inspector returned with the dead body". Dr. Russell of Cashel arrived as well, and an ambulance arrived at 9.15 pm to bring the wounded Brady to Tipperary town.⁵¹ It is certainly interesting to see a woman both organising the intelligence and involved in collecting the arms after the ambush. This implies that Mary O'Dwyer was near the scene of the ambush when it was happening. According to Michael Burke, "The success of this ambush was considerably helped by her efforts".⁵²

The Capture and Killing of David Cummins

During the War of Independence spies and informers were a serious threat to the republican movement. They were responsible for the capture of IRA volunteers, foiling attacks and plans and often the death of volunteers. Therefore the IRA dealt with them very harshly, and they were often shot dead as an example to others. County Tipperary was no different. According to Pádraig Óg Ó Ruairc's research sixteen spies were killed there during the war,⁵³ while Denis G. Marnane has concluded that the figure was eighteen.⁵⁴

In July 1921 Mary O'Dwyer was involved in the capture and killing of an alleged spy, David Cummins. He worked as a chauffeur for Frederick Armitage, of Noan House, a landlord with a large estate in the Ballinure area. Cummins came from a family of eleven in Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal.⁵⁵ He served with the British forces during the First World War,⁵⁶ and when he returned he started to work again as a chauffeur for Armitage.

Cummins was suspected by the IRA to have been a spy. Capt. Mulcahy in his Witness Statement casts some doubt on this suspicion, saying: 'I had known him for some time but had no evidence that he was a spy. The Brigade and Battalion Staffs had apparently information about him of which I was not, or am not now aware'.⁵⁷ Capt. Tierney was slightly more vague, saying 'What the specific charge against him was, I cannot now recall — perhaps I never heard it'.⁵⁸ Whether Cummins was actually a spy or not will be examined later. On July 8th 1921, three days before the Truce, Mary O'Dwyer was sent by Ned O'Dwyer, her future husband, to scout the Noan Estate to make sure that it was clear of Crown Forces. She reported back that it was clear and they, with others, entered and captured Cummins in the stables 'in broad daylight'. According to Mulcahy, 'he made no effort to resist nor did he protest in any way',⁵⁹ which will become important later on.

He was brought to Meldrum House (Fig. 6), nearby, where only a caretaker was living. The volunteers known to be involved in his capture and execution are as follows: Paddy Byrne (then Battalion quartermaster), Ned O'Dwyer, Capt. Paul Mulcahy, Capt. Timothy Tierney. Comm. Seán Downey, who had taken over after Tommy Donovan was killed in November 1920, sent Tierney to Meldrum, to give the order that Cummins was to be shot.



Fig. 6: Meldrum House, where Cummins was executed.

Cummins was asked by Byrne if he wanted to see a priest, but replied simply 'No, I am not a Catholic'.⁶⁰ While the execution was being carried out, Mary O'Dwyer was on lookout duty outside the house. Cummins's body was then brought to the roadside at Dualla, where a notice stating 'Convicted Spy; Spies and Informers Beware' was put on it.

Four days later, on 12 July 1921, Cummins's funeral took place in Tipperary town. Businesses in the town were issued with an order by the Urban Council stating the following: 'All business premises will be closed to-day, July 12, between 2 p.m. and 3.30 p.m., on account of the funeral of D. Cummins, an ex-soldier, who was brutally done to death by rebels at Dualla on the 8th July'.⁶¹ According to the newspapers, the citizens obliged, but as soon as they did so, "young men, however, notified the shopkeepers that their premises were to remain open by order of the IRA". Some businesses re-opened immediately, while others followed suit after a period of hesitation.⁶²

The question of whether Cummins was actually a spy, until recently, was still a matter of debate. As stated, Mulcahy and Tierney both said that they did not know of any evidence for the claim that he was a spy. The suspicion may simply have been there because Cummins was a protestant ex-soldier working for a loyalist landlord. However, as Pádraig Óg Ó Ruairc points out in his book, simply because those involved in his execution were not privy to the evidence for his conviction, does not mean that there was no evidence.⁶³ It has now emerged, however, that the IRA appears to have documentary evidence to support its conviction of Cummins. Marnane has recently drawn attention to a written statement, dated 1936, from an intelligence officer in the 7th Battalion, which states: "when the trunk of this man was broken open and there documents found proving beyond doubt that this Englishman was a spy. He was shot".⁶⁴

As pointed out earlier on Cummins 'made no effort to resist nor did he protest in any way'. Presumably he accepted his fate because he knew there was no way out. Further evidence for his status as a spy is contained in the records of the Ireland Compensation Commission, which was run jointly by the British Government and the Free State government. It granted £600 to Cummins' mother and, importantly, 'Agreed 50/50' in terms of British responsibility. As Ó Ruairc points out, this is quite an ambiguous ruling.⁶⁵ It, in itself, does not prove that Cummins was a spy, but it is an admission by the British that they were partly responsible for his death. What other reason could there be for this other than that Cummins was a spy?

Some historians argue that there was an effort by the IRA to deal with as many spies as possible in the last days before the Truce. This belief is credible in some circumstances, but in the case of Cummins it is very unlikely that the local volunteers had any idea about an agreement which had not been agreed or announced yet. Mulcahy says that

the decision to execute Cummins was made before his capture, so at least four or five days before the Truce announcement was made. It also might be claimed that Cummins was shot because he was a Protestant. This claim is questionable, as of the known spies executed in Tipperary during the War of Independence over two-thirds of them were Catholic.⁶⁶ But it may have been perceived that Protestants were more likely to supply information to the British, as most of the time their sympathies would be with unionism and loyalism. Cummins was buried in the graveyard at St. Mary's Church of Ireland, Tipperary, in an unmarked grave. Neither the Armitage family, nor his own family, erected a headstone to him.

Mary O'Dwyer's involvement in the capture and death of Cummins is very interesting. While it was seldom that Cumann na mBan women were involved in the killing and wounding of RIC men, it was quite extraordinary to have a woman involved in the capture and execution of a spy. Presumably, she was selected for involvement in the Cummins affair for two reasons. Firstly, as she had shown at the Newtown Ambush a year earlier, she was known to be capable of carrying out difficult orders. In fact, Geraldine Purcell, president of the 1st Battalion, wrote that "she was an excellent officer and was always at her post when required either night or day".⁶⁷ Secondly, Mary O'Dwyer was from Coleraine, which is very close to Noan, Meldrum and Dualla, and she knew the local landscapes very well.

Truce and Civil War

The Truce was declared on 11 July 1921. During this period of peace, many camps were set up throughout the country by the IRA to train their soldiers, so that in the case of another outbreak of war they would be fully prepared. This was no different in Mary O'Dwyer's local area, where an IRA officer's training camp was established at Ballinard Castle (Fig. 7), Cloneen, near Fethard. The training officer was Sergeant Prout, a Tipperary man who served in the US Army during World War 1. Ballinard Castle is an ideal place for a training camp. It is surrounded by fields and a wood, which would have been a suitable place to train for guerrilla warfare, and there are lots of sheds and buildings which could have been used for accommodation. The castle was owned by William Quirke, an Intelligence Officer in the 3rd Tipperary Brigade, and later a Fianna Fáil senator. Mary O'Dwyer attended the camp for three weeks and catered for the men, as well as organising dances for them. In fact, she used to joke that "Joining Cumann na mBan improved my social life dramatically."⁶⁸ A number of photographs of this training camp were taken by Lt. Seán Sharkey (Fig. 8), and these seem to show that there was a relaxed



Fig. 7: Ballinard Castle, location of the training camp set up during the Truce. (Photo: Oisín Sheehan, 2016).



Fig. 8: Two officers training at Ballinard. (Source: Sharkey, N., 'The Third Tipperary Brigade – a photographic record', Tipperary Historical Journal 1994).

and enjoyable atmosphere there. This said, there was a general apprehension amongst Irish republicans at this time with regards to the agreement soon to be made in London.

After some months of negotiation the Treaty was signed. Many Irish republicans, including many in south Tipperary, were not satisfied with its terms. As a result, in June 1922, the Civil War broke out. Most of the IRA and Cumann na mBan in the 3rd Brigade's territory fought against the Treaty, including people like Dan Breen, Dinny Lacey and Mary O'Dwyer. The Free State commanding officer in Tipperary was Major-General Prout, who had earlier been associated with the Ballinard training camp. Mary O'Dwyer was now in a difficult personal situation as the leader of her enemy in Tipperary was the man she had known during her time at Ballinard.

The work Mary O'Dwyer undertook during the Civil War was undoubtedly just as dangerous as what she did during the War of Independence, as the Free State army dealt severely with captured republicans. During this time, she was working as an attendant in Clonmel District Mental Hospital. She spied on the Free State forces in Clonmel and reported back to the IRA. Her information often proved important, as James Nugent wrote: "From her information from time to time we were able to locate Free State forces". On another occasion, she learned in Clonmel that there were Free State soldiers approaching a location near Dualla, to raid anti-Treaty IRA members who were hiding there. Mary immediately cycled to warn the men, and located them before the arrival of the Free State soldiers. Nugent wrote that "through her information I got the opportunity of escaping".⁶⁹

She also scouted and guided Dan Breen's famous Flying Column in the area between Drangan and Dualla (around 20 km). On one occasion Breen sent her into Thurles to get information on the strength of the Free State forces there. She was, however, caught and arrested. It must have been harder for her to do this type of work during the Civil War because some of the Free State soldiers would have known her, including Major-General Prout. She was released from custody after four nights. It is remarkable that Mary O'Dwyer, who had been involved in many intelligence-gathering activities and other types of work, was only arrested once during the War of Independence and Civil War. She got away with a lot, presumably because she was good at what she did.

Mary O'Dwyer continued as a captain in Cumann na mBan until the end of the Civil War in May 1923. According to her friend in later life, Pat O'Donnell, she only reluctantly accepted the Free State and always remained sympathetic with the original aims of the First Dáil.

Return to Normality

Mary O'Dwyer married Edward O'Dwyer in April 1926.⁷⁰ Like Mary, he worked in Clonmel District Mental Hospital. Edward, or 'Ned' (Fig. 9), was from Knockavilla in west Tipperary. He was a member of the 2nd Battalion and, with Mary, had been involved in the capture and killing of Cummins. He also served in Dinny Lacey's Flying Column during the Civil War.

The O'Dwyer's had three children, Philomena, Joan, and Angela, and the family lived in Kilsheelan, near Clonmel. In the late 1940's they bought a farm in Caherbaun, just across the road from Mary's birth place of Coleraine. Following Ned's death, in 1971, she sold the farm and moved to nearby Mocklershill. Later, her daughter and son-in-law, Joan and Colm, came here to live with her.

In the final years of her long life she was often visited by people who were interested in the War of Independence and republicanism. These included Martin O'Dwyer, who wrote a number of books on Tipperary's War of Independence, and Pat O'Donnell, who shared her republican interests. Some of the more famous people who called to her were Fr. Des Wilson, who, in Gerry Adams' opinion, "was central to efforts to develop a peace process years before it eventually took root",⁷¹ and Fr. Paddy Ryan, the 'republican priest', who was wanted by Scotland Yard and who stayed at her home on occasions. In fact, Fr. Ryan was eventually found by Gardaí during a raid on her house in 1992.⁷² She was ninety years of age at the time.



Fig. 9: Ned O'Dwyer, who Mary O'Dwyer married, either during the War of Independence or Civil War.

Mary O'Dwyer lived to be 100 years old. She was the last surviving member of Cumann na mBan in Tipperary and one of the last in Ireland. A civic reception was held in her honour in 2002 by Cashel Urban District Council (Fig. 10), which she greatly enjoyed. She also had a birthday celebration in Dualla, with family, friends and local politicians. She proudly wore her War of Independence medal that night.

In St. Patrick's Hospital, Cashel, on March 29th, 2003, in her 101st year, Captain Mary O'Dwyer passed away. She now rests in Dualla, the 'patriot village', with her husband, Ned, another veteran of the War of Independence. Her grave lies within yards of the monument to Piersie McCan, who inspired her to fight for Irish freedom.



Fig. 10: Mary O'Dwyer, centre, pictured after leaving the Cashel Urban District Council civic reception held in her honour, in 2002. Pictured, from left to right are: Adrian Corcoran, her grandson, Joan Corcoran, her daughter, and Rita Smyth, her niece. (Source: Liz Gills, Women of the Irish Revolution, Cork, 2014)

We can now fully understand the words of Dan Breen, and fully appreciate the fact that Mary O'Dwyer really was "more a volunteer than a member of Cumann na mBan".



Fig. 11: Mary O'Dwyer, pictured at her hundredth birthday.

Acknowledgements

Several people were of great assistance to me in researching this topic. I would like to thank Rita Smyth, Cloneen, Co. Tipperary, a niece of Mary O'Dwyer, for accompanying me to different locations that are mentioned in the text and Cathleen Cleary, Thurles, for supplying me with Fig. 1. I owe a huge debt to Pat O'Donnell, Kilconnell, Co. Tipperary, who was a good friend of Mary, and who answered my many questions; Seán Nugent, son of former O/C James Nugent, who made me aware of important details; Adrian Corcoran, Mary O'Dwyer's grandson who provided me with extra information about her life.

References

- 1 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p. 48.
- 2 *Tipperary Star*, 20 April 2002.
- 3 Marnane, D.G., *The 3rd Brigade: A History of the Volunteers/IRA in South Tipperary, 1913-21*, (Tipperary County Council Library Service, 2018) p. 298.
- 4 In the 1901 Census, Honoria is registered as being 5 years of age and daughter of John Breen. She is not recorded in the 1911 census. John Breen (who filled in the census), wrote in 1911 that there were 5 children born and 5 still alive in the household. However, the census records show that there were 6 born, and 5 alive in 1911. Presumably Honoria died between 1901 and 1911.
- 5 *Census of Ireland, 1901, 1911*.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p. 49
- 8 I thank Pat O'Donnell, Mocklershill, a good friend of Mary O'Dwyer's, whom I interviewed in January 2017, for informing me of this.
- 9 *Irish Times*, 10 March 1919.
- 10 BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Capt. Paul Mulcahy), p. 2.
- 11 BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Capt. Paul Mulcahy), p. 4.
- 12 *Irish Times*, 10 March 1919.
- 13 *Dáil Éireann – Volume 1 – 10 April, 1919*.
- 14 *Irish Independent*, 10 March 1919.
- 15 *Tipperary Star*, 20 April 2002.
- 16 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p. 38.
- 17 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p. 49.
- 18 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p. 36.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p. 48.
- 21 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p. 49.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p. 50.
- 26 BMH Witness Statement 1227 (Capt. Timothy Tierney), pp. 8,9.
- 27 BMH Witness Statement 1227 (Capt. Timothy Tierney), p. 6.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p. 49.
- 30 BMH Witness Statement 1227 (Capt. Timothy Tierney), p. 6.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Capt. Paul Mulcahy), p. 9.
- 33 BMH Witness Statement 1363 (Comdt. Seán Walshe), p. 4.
- 34 BMH Witness Statement 1363 (Comdt. Seán Walshe), p. 4.
- 35 BMH Witness Statement 1363 (Comdt. Seán Walshe), p. 4, BMH Witness Statement 1227 (Capt. Timothy Tierney), pg. 6, BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Capt. Paul Mulcahy), p. 9.
- 36 BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Capt. Paul Mulcahy), p. 9.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Capt. Paul Mulcahy), pp. 9,10.
- 39 BMH Witness Statement 1363 (Capt. Seán Walshe), p. 4.
- 40 *Cork Examiner*, 5 July 1920, *Freeman's Journal*, 2 July 1920, *Skibereen Eagle*, 3 July 1920, *Skibereen Eagle*, 10 July 1920, *The Liberator (Tralee)*, 3 July 1920, *Ulster Herald*, 10 July 1920.
- 41 J. Reynolds, *46 Men Dead: The Royal Irish Constabulary in County Tipperary 1919–22* (Dublin, 2016).

- 42 BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Capt. Paul Mulcahy), pp. 10.
- 43 *Cork Examiner*, 5 July 1920, p. 5.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 *Cork Examiner*, 5 July 1920, p. 5.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 BMH Witness Statement 1363 (Capt. Seán Walshe), p. 5.
- 50 BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Capt. Paul Mulcahy), p. 11.
- 51 *Cork Examiner*, 5th July 1920, pg. 5.
- 52 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p.41
- 53 Ó Ruairc, P.Ó., *Truce: Murder, Myth and the Last Days of the Irish War of Independence* (Cork, Mercier Press, 2016) pp. 104-05,
- 54 Marnane, *3rd Brigade*, pp. 407-08. (See also Appendix 4).
- 55 Census of Ireland, 1901.
- 56 *Freeman's Journal*, 13 July 1921
- 57 BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Capt. Paul Mulcahy), p. 15
- 58 BMH Witness Statement 1227 (Capt. Timothy Tierney), p. 13
- 59 BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Capt. Paul Mulcahy), p. 15
- 60 Ibid
- 61 *Nenagh News*, 16 July 1921.
- 62 *Freeman's Journal*, 13th July 1921, pg. 5; *Cork Examiner*, 13th July 1921; *Nenagh News*, 16th July 1921
- 63 Ó Ruairc, P.Ó., 2016. *Truce: Murder, Myth and the Last Days of the Irish War of Independence*, Cork, Mercier Press, p. 84.
- 64 Marnane, *3rd Brigade*, p. 417.
- 65 Ó Ruairc, P.Ó., 2016. *Truce: Murder, Myth and the Last Days of the Irish War of Independence*, Cork, Mercier Press, p. 84.
- 66 Ibid. p. 104.
- 67 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p. 38.
- 68 Pat O'Donnell.
- 69 BMH Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer) p .42.
- 70 I thank Adrian Corcoran, a grand-son of Mary's, for informing me of this.
- 71 *Irish Times*, 30 November 2015.
- 72 *Irish Independent*, 30 April 1992.