

How a Donegal Rebel Died in Wicklow.

By Mattie Lennon.

Neil O 'Boyle was born, on a small farm, at Leac Eineach near Burtonport, County Donegal in 1898. It was here in the Breac Ghaeltacht area of the Rosses that the young Boyle's character was formed and his determination strengthened. According to his schoolmates he was tall for his age, lanky and silent.

Not overly particular about his appearance, he always appeared to have something on his mind. He had a look in his eye, " ... as if he was going to do something".

During some obscure incident he expressed admiration for Joseph Mary Plunkett and, schoolboys being schoolboys, he was nicknamed, "Plunkett". The name stuck.

As he grew up he didn't develop any interest in sartorial matters but became more talkative. He was interested in National affairs, sang Irish ballads and advocated the revival of the Irish language.

He did not, however, push his views or beliefs on other people. "Because I believe these things I will always stick to them; but I do not want to force any other person to believe as I do. Let everyone be honest with himself and do what he thinks right. It is my duty to tell you what I believe should be done".

He became a dedicated supporter of Sinn Fein and I am indebted to, Donegal historian, Patrick Bonner for the following story;

Boys gathered in the evenings outside Johnny Ruadh's shop in Burtonport to discuss the policy of Sinn Fein. Eventually, the police decided to disperse the meetings as a precautionary measure. One night Plunkett came home in an angry mood. He told his mother that the police had moved the boys away from the shop corner, where they had only been talking among themselves.

"What kind of men are you?" said his mother. "You allow the police to order you about in your own country. If I were a man, no policeman would move me from a place where I was doing no harm".

But what could we do, mother? The police had batons -- "

"And Johnny Ruadh has spades"

Plunkett said no more that night, but at the next meeting he procured a spade and held back the police attack.

Commenting on the incident twenty-five years afterwards, his mother remarked; "I didn't think he had paid so much attention to my words, because I didn't mean all I said. I was greatly surprised when I heard what he did

".

He was aged 18 when his father died and in 1917 he became an assistant guard with the Londonderry and Lough Swilly Railway Company.

In 1919 police interest in Plunkett led to his resignation from the Railway Company. He went to work as a miner in the New Mains Colliery, in Scotland and joined B Company, 2nd Battalion Scottish Brigade, IRA.

*When Ireland called forth her true sons of the heather,
O 'Boyle was the foremost to answer the call,
The sons of the Rosses he banded together,
To drive the oppressor from dark Donegal.*

With B Company he was engaged on the special work of sending arms to Ireland and was arrested in December 1920 and sentenced to five years penal servitude for possession of arms and ammunition. During his time in Peterhead Prison he received harsh treatment and periods of solitary confinement.

He developed an intense dislike of warders but despite this and a ban on books in the prison he procured a copy of *Pitman's Shorthand Manual*, which he studied.

He was released in February 1922 under the Treaty Amnesty and returned to Donegal immediately.

His companions noticed a change in him. "He had become smart in appearance, was quiet in manner and gave the impression of a man who had acquired a settled purpose". In the months preceding the General Election of June 1922 he remained firmly anti-Treaty.

On 01st July 1922 he was arrested at Crolly and detained for a short time at Dungloe before being brought to Drumboe and later to Finner Camp. At the end of August he was taken, with other prisoners, from Bunrana to Dublin on the "Lady Wicklow".

Fellow-prisoners remembered Plunkett as a man bent on escape. He planned to escape, at Doochary, from the lorry carrying them to Drumboe but a prisoner jumped too soon. He set to work on a tunnel at Finner and this was discovered. At Bunrana he attempted to organise a group of prisoners to seize the tug, which conveyed them to the "Lady Wicklow" and later he tried to arrange the seizure of the "Lady Wicklow" itself.

From Dublin they were brought to Newbridge where Plunkett lost no time in starting work on a tunnel from G Block. This "project" was abandoned when one of the group found a map. The plan of the sewerage system, which had been used by the Board of Works, came in very handy. With the help of another Donegal man, who was an experienced miner, Plunkett constructed a tunnel from R Block into the sewerage drain.

On 14th October 1922 the young man who had held the police at bay with Johnny Ruadh's spade walked, with 160 other prisoners, into the river Liffey ... and freedom.

Plunkett made his way to Dublin, where he was appointed Commandant of the 3rd Battalion, Dublin number 2 Brigade and he took up duty in North/West Wicklow

early in November 1922. He immediately went to work re-organising the battalion column. (Before the escape from Newbridge he had told a comrade, "In three weeks time I will have a rifle in my hands on the Wicklow Hills".)

He acquired a lorry which was known as "Rory of the Hills" and for six months operated in the mountainous area between Tallagh and Glenmalure. The months of hardship and hunger took its toll and by the spring of 1923 he was close to physical exhaustion but his determination had not diminished. In a letter to his mother he wrote, "I am still in Michael Dwyer's country and I will stick it out to the end".

In Valkeymount he said that the British element was, " ... again becoming entrenched in its position of ascendancy in Wicklow while the common people resumed their futile position of mountainy men".

According to Republican sources Plunkett obeyed the Cease-fire Order of 30th April 1923 and merely stayed on the run awaiting further instructions. Troops stationed at Naas, Blessington and Tallagh intensified the search for him.

On the morning of 8th May 1923 an attacking party numbering engaged with Plunkett's Column at Kylebeg.

Here is an account of Plunkett's time in Kylebeg and Lacken. It was given to me by Michelle Boyle , a relative of Plunkett.

Around 5am Rosie Kelly was out with sheep when she seen Free State soldiers in the vicinity. She told the volunteers. They went into the woods and hid behind a wall. As soon as Free State Soldiers came looking, Plunkett and the column opened fire. The Free State Soldiers sheltered behind Kelly's house. It wasn't long until another band of Free State Soldiers came from Moin a' Bhealaigh and they shot into the woods. They hit their own men but none was hurt seriously. Some volunteers were in Free State soldier's clothes and managed to escape quickly across the hills. The Column was all very tired and was glad to rest that night.

At around this time Plunkett was after getting a shipment of arms from Belfast. That night in Kylebeg they had 2 Thompson guns and 7 rifles. The soldiers had Lewis guns and rifles and there were about 80 soldiers. Plunkett was a good leader, he was hot-headed but you couldn't frighten him. He had a sharp mind, knew what time to attack and what time to retreat. And when they were escaping, Wicklow men could guide him to safe houses and over the hills ...

Plunkett spent many nights in Lamberts and Christopher and Mary Lambert accompanied his body to Donegal. She used to write to his mother later until she died. Over the river from Knocknadruc there's a road across from the national school on the road .In the 1920's here were 2 teachers here Dolan and Kenneth who volunteers visited often. Dr. Purseal moved to this area then and treated volunteers. He saved Vol. Barry from Kilbride who was once hurt. Often volunteers went to Glendaloch and Glenmalure.

The column consisted of Sé ;amas " Cáinte, Mìcheál? " Coileáin, Criostóir de Barra, Pádraig? Raghallaigh, Bearnárd? Corcáin, Dan Mac aoidh, F. Plléimeann, Pádraig "

Seanáin, Séamas Mac Murch?, Pádraig " Feargail, Séamas " Maoilaidh, Séan Mac Reámoinn agus Seán? Treasaigh.

On the night preceding 15th May 1922 Plunkett billeted his column in a three-roomed house owned by the Norton family, at Knocknadruc. At about four o'clock in the morning the house was surrounded by Free State Soldiers led by Belfastman Felix McCorley.

In Pádraig " Baoighill's book *Oglach na Rossa*?the following account?given by Tom Heavey, a member of the column, is quoted:

Plunkett wanted the mother and daughter to be let out of the house. The Staters wouldn't hear of that and threatened to bomb them out. That was a favourite trick throwing grenades through the window. This put Plunkett in a spot as he couldn't let the women be injured. So he said, "Let me come out". Out he came with his hands up and walked slowly towards a stone stile, then at the right hand corner of the house. When he got there he spoke a few words with this Free State Officer named McCorley, a Belfast man perched on a stone ditch above him. Suddenly McCorley raised his revolver and shot Plunkett in the eye, the bullet passing through his upraised hands. For good measure he shot him again through the head.. He just shot him. I saw it all. It was cold blooded murder. The others in the house were rounded up and taken away ...

He was a tall fellow with a strong face, upright and handsome and a good leader.

Another account quoted states that, "Neither spiritual nor medical aid was summoned for the dying soldier although a priest could have been got inside 15 minutes".

Pádraig " Baoighill also gives the "Free State account " which appeared in the "Wicklow Newsletter".

A party of troops from Naas operating in the hills about Valleymount district surrounded a house about 4.00 a.m. to-day were proceeding to close in on a building when fire was opened on the troops from within. The troops replied and a short engagement ensued in the course of which Plunkett leader of the party of Irregulars in the house was shot dead. The Irregulars numbering 12 in all (in addition to their leader) surrendered and were made prisoners. With the party the following material was captured - 10 rifles, 2 Thompson machine guns and a quantity of ammunition.

According to a report in the "Derry Journal "(26/05/1923) the following was found in Norton's house; Ten rifles, 951 rounds .303 ammunition, 339 rounds Thompson gun ammunition, two Thompson guns and 3 magazines, one pair binoculars, three Sam Brown belts, six bandoliers four haversacks, six ammunition pouches, one Colt revolver, one shorts Webley revolver, one bicycle and some other military equipment.

Plunkett's body was taken to Naas where an inquest was held. He was waked for one night in Manor Kilbride Church before being taken on the final journey to his beloved Rosses. He is buried in Kincasslagh graveyard.

*Now bravely he sleeps by the rim of the ocean,
No wind nor no tempest, his slumber can spoil.*

*Long, long we'll remember with faith and devotion,
The fate of our chieftain, Neil Plunkett O 'Boyle.*

I am indebted to Michelle Boyle, Padraig " Baoighill and Patrick Bonner who provided me with source material and pictures for this piece. Mattie Lennon.