

# The Scramogue Ambush 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1921

## - Interviews and Some Unrecorded Facts

By Gerald Greene

### Contents

Why I picked this topic? .....	2
Why was there an Ambush? .....	2
Who was involved in the Ambush?.....	3
Why was Scramogue picked for the Ambush? .....	4
What Guns were Used? .....	5
Map of the Ambush site.....	6
What preparations were made before the Ambush?.....	7
The Ambush .....	8
What happened after the Ambush? .....	10
What was the Impact of Ambush?.....	13
Some Interesting Images .....	14
Bibliography .....	22
Acknowledgements.....	23



At the site of the Scramogue Ambush

## Why I picked this topic?

I picked this topic because I love reading about the War of Independence. This year is the 100th Anniversary of the Scramogue Ambush which happened close to where I live. My grandparents often spoke about the Ambush and I wanted to find out more. During my research, I was fortunate to meet close family members of those involved in the ambush who were willing to share previously undocumented facts about the event.

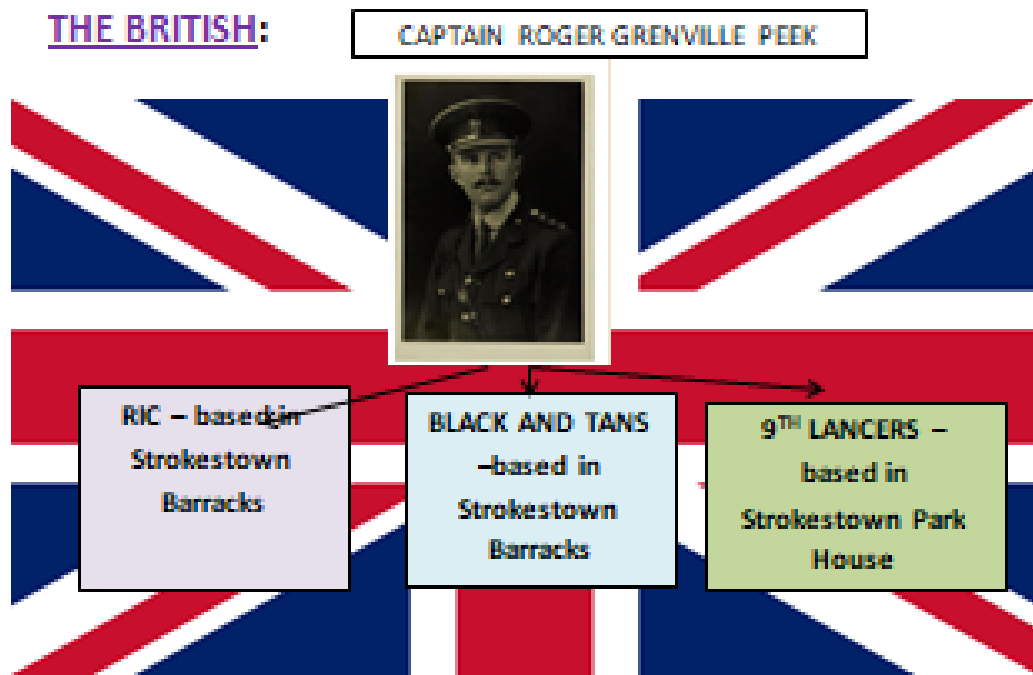
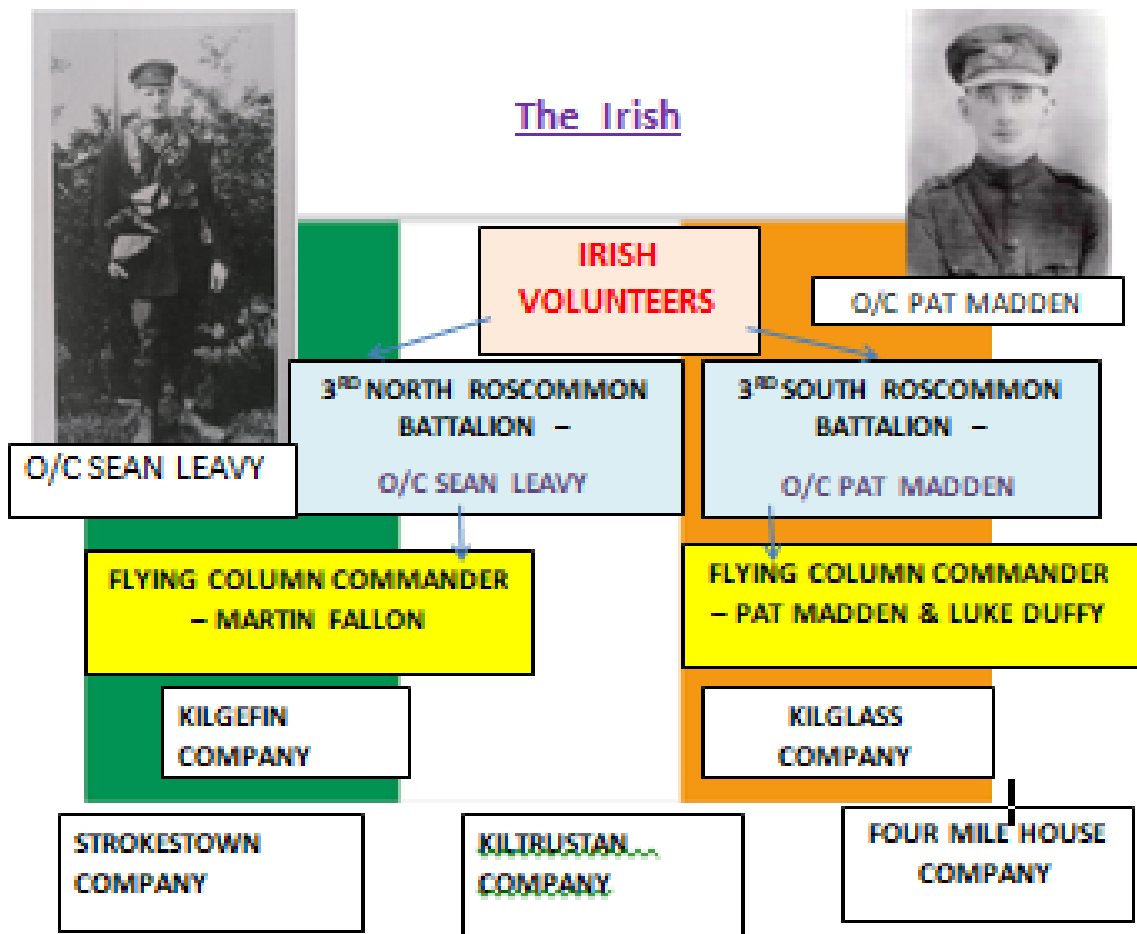
## Why was there an Ambush?

At the time of the ambush, the Irish had been under British rule for 700 years. Roscommon was one of the first counties to reflect the 'utter change' after 1916. In 1919, the War of Independence began. The Irish Volunteers, now the army of the Irish Republic, used the tactic of guerrilla warfare which involved ambushes, burning of RIC barracks and attacks on British military positions. Roscommon was a relatively flat country and didn't offer much cover for carrying out such attacks. However, Michael Collins of the IRA GHQ demanded more activity and sent Sean Connolly, a great guerrilla leader, to organise the Roscommon Volunteers. He wasted no time in getting the various battalions on a war footing.

## Who was involved in the Ambush?

It was a joint operation on the Irish side involving both the Third Battalion of the South Roscommon Brigade and the Third Battalion of the North Roscommon Brigade. Each battalion organised its own Flying Column consisting of local volunteers and ex-British soldiers. These were involved in the planning and the execution of the ambush as they had knowledge of the local area and they could avail of safehouses in the vicinity to lie low after an ambush.

On the British side, there were sixty or so RIC and Black and Tans stationed in the old barrack in Strokestown. In Strokestown Park House nearby, there were approximately 150 soldiers of the 9th Lancers and the East York Regiment. In charge of all the British forces in the town was Captain Roger Grenville Peek. He had a fearsome reputation.



## Why was Scramogue picked for the Ambush?

The Roscommon Volunteers wanted to plan an ambush on the Strokestown-Longford route. It was a tarred road in 1921 so it was used as a main communication route for the British military lorries almost every day travelling between Athlone, Roscommon and Boyle.

Sean Connolly had inspected many places in which to set up an ambush on the enemy and the Ashbrook area in Scramogue at the foot of Sliabh Bán mountain seemed the most suitable. It had a sharp bend and was on an incline requiring vehicles coming from Strokestown to slow down. The nearby mountain offered the perfect topography in the event of a retreat. Shortly afterwards, he was moved to Leitrim by GHQ and was killed. The Volunteers decided to avenge his death by proceeding with his ambush plans.

They noticed British military passed the road daily, usually early morning-time. Sean Leavy, who was in charge of the North Battalion, had a house near the bend on the side of the road. Two volunteers went to visit him and said "Sean your house will definitely be blown up if anything close by happens to it." Sean replied "I don't give a damn if it's blown up as long as we get the job done".

## What Guns were Used?

When planning the operation, the officers realised that they were short on long-range arms. They borrowed from Longford and North Roscommon Brigades. Soon eleven Lee Enfields, a Winchester, a sporting rifle, 20 shotguns and three Webley revolvers were gathered. This was the largest collection of arms the officers had seen at one place in the county.



Service Rifle

Webley Revolver





## What preparations were made before the Ambush?

The Volunteers were on the ambush site at 3a.m. on 23rd March, 1921. The Cumann na mBan girls had waited up to cook for the troops. The Battalion from Strokestown had the job of blocking the roads in the area to prevent British reinforcements from quickly reaching the surrounding area of the ambush. They decided to evacuate the people from the neighbouring houses and put them under armed guard at Earley's house further up the road.

Men dug a trench behind the hedge (B) which commanded the bend of the road so they would have protection from rifle fire. The hedge itself was cut back to improve communication. The main body consisting of 12 Volunteers armed with shotguns was in the trench(B) . It was 6 foot below road level. The men in the trench had access to house(C) from where they could use the back lane as an escape route to Sliabh Bán. There was a reserve of ten men a short distance away(E). The roadside house (A) was loop-holed for riflemen and an exit hole cut in the wall so they could escape. Two expert riflemen took up position in this house - believed to be John Gibbons and 'Buzzer' Farrell. Captain Jack Murphy was tasked with observing the road to Strokestown and to inform the waiting men when the enemy was approaching.



## The Ambush



At 7.10am the men heard the sound they had been waiting for.

The first lorry was allowed up to the waiting shotgun men (X) and was fired on by the riflemen in the house (A). The Crossley Tender staggered like a

bird hit on the wing and the driver, John Keenan of the Royal Army Service Corps, slumped back in his seat dead. The gunner, Corporal Hogbin, sat beside a Hotchkiss machine gun and fired it but he too was quickly put out of action. Two military officers, Captain Peek and Lieutenant Tennant, who were sitting in the front seat beside the driver, jumped from the lorry and attempted to escape. They thought the attack was solely from the house but they were exposed in the direction of the men in the trench and were shot (B). Captain Peek was wounded but he continued running up the road. He was probably hoping to meet the second lorry containing Tans.

When the firing ceased, two civilians emerged from the back of the Crossley Tender with their hands up. They were being brought to Longford as prisoners. The column assumed that they were IRA prisoners but soon discovered that they were Tans. When the second lorry of soldiers following at a good distance behind heard the gunfire, it turned and sped back to Strokestown.



My Impression of the Ambush

## What happened after the Ambush?

In a few minutes it was all over. The Column quickly collected the enemy's weapons. The Hotchkiss machine gun (see picture below) which was bolted to the floor of the lorry and ammunition were removed. They captured 5 Lee Enfield rifles and 2 Webley revolvers to add to the column's arms. The lorry was sprinkled with petrol and set on fire on the roadside. Pat Madden ordered his men to disperse. Some men from the local and Kilgefin companies remained on scout.

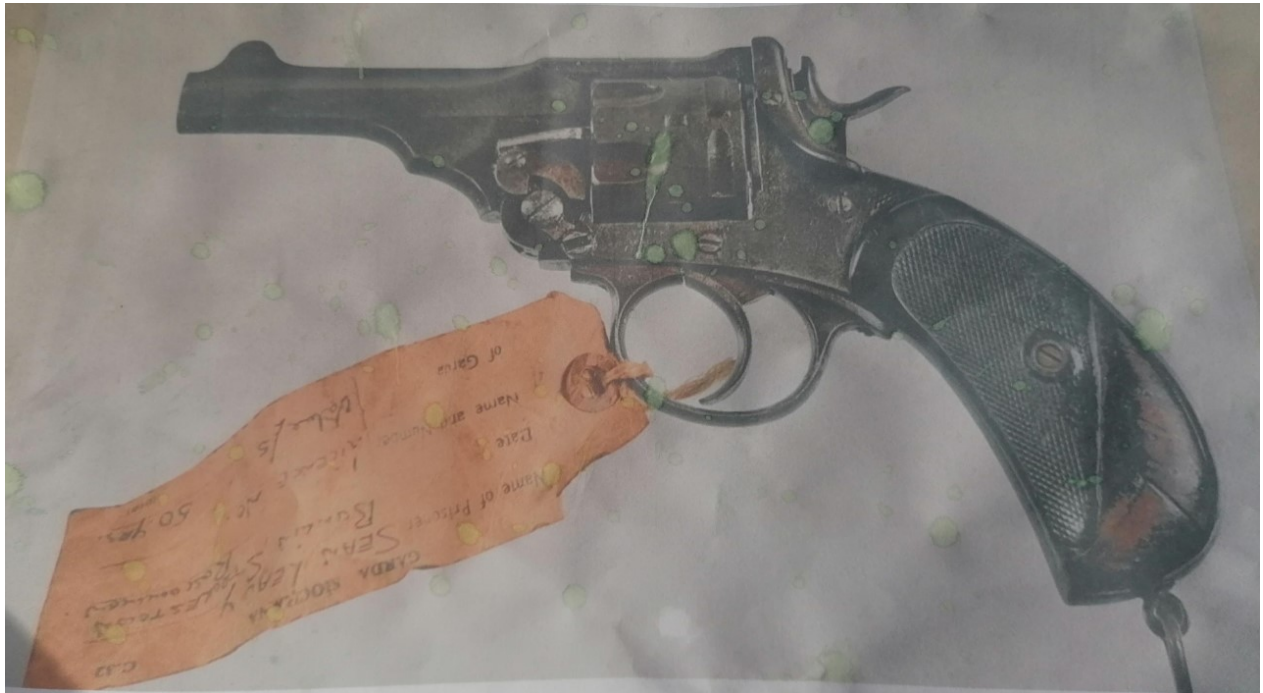


The Scramogue Ambush: Roscommon Steps ...  
[thewildgeese.irish](#)

Pat Madden and Martin Fallon quickly marshalled their men and both Tans across Sliabh Bán. Fallon had the rifles and ammunition and Madden had the Hotchkiss gun. None of them knew how to operate the machine gun however. Still, it was such a prize that Madden gave the North Roscommon men all the Enfields in return for keeping the Hotchkiss gun.

As he lay dying, Captain Peek's gun was retrieved at the ambush site by Sean Leavy and was held in his possession until the late 60s - early 70s. As it was a licensed gun, it was collected by An Garda Síochána as part of a nationwide operation by the Department of Defence. Recently it was located by his grandson Kieran Leavy with

the assistance of the authorities. The possibility of decommissioning the gun is now being explored, which should give the opportunity of having it displayed at a suitable location. (see photograph).



### Captain Peek's Gun

### Whippet tank



Meanwhile in Roscommon town, District-Inspector Cole had begun to galvanise his troops. A whippet tank and 8 lorry loads of troops were sent up towards the mountain.

Two IRA men, Pat Mullooly and Brian Nangle of the North Roscommon column delayed in dispersing after the ambush and, according to my local historian, the British fired on them as they ran out of John Farrell's Pub in Doughall on the foothills of Sliabh Bán. Both men surrendered and were interrogated and badly beaten but refused to give any information. Unfortunately for them, the British captured documents indicating that Pat Mullooly's brother

was an IRA officer. The day after the ambush a convoy of 11 trucks of RIC and Black and Tans raided Pat Mullooly's house. They dragged out his younger brother Michael and shot him dead in the garden. He was just 24 years old and had no part in the ambush. The Crown Forces had got their revenge.

Pat Mullooly and Nangle were both driven to the Lancers Headquarters in Roscommon. They were badly beaten and whipped with a Cat O' Nine Tails. They were treated for their injuries in the Curragh Hospital. Patrick Mullooly was returned to Athlone Prison from where he made a daring escape two months later.



The captured Tans were brought across Sliabh Bán to a safe house owned by Owens in the townland of Tuam. It was decided to separate them when they discovered the Tans were dropping pieces of ripped up paper to leave a trail to

follow. Madden's men made one of the Tans, Constable Evans, show them how to use the Hotchkiss and after that they shot him and buried him in Cloonboney Bog. Mattie Gorman, the current owner of the bog, brought me to the burial site which is marked by a bush. He also pointed out Owens' safe house. He related the story that no relative has ever claimed the body which is buried with just a metal identification plate. The other Tan named Constable Buchanan was brought by Fallon's column to Curraghroe, shot and disposed of in the nearby river Shannon.

Back in Ashbrook, the Crown Forces burned the house which had been loopoled (A). During my interviews, I discovered that women and children in the area were rounded up and interrogated in Roscommon jail about the activities of their menfolk. Not one of them revealed any information and neither were they harmed. The expected backlash never came. This was mainly due to the fact that the Crowns Forces lost their two main leaders - Lieutenant Tennant and Captain Peek who served as their intelligence officer. It was

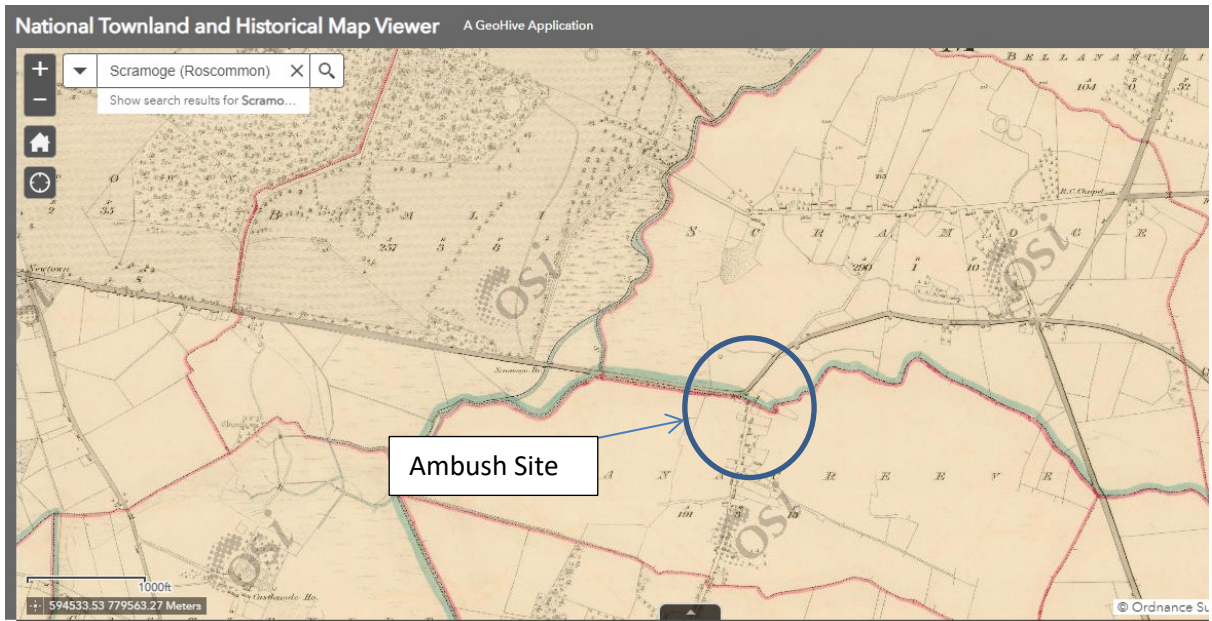
believed this absence of leadership probably saved the burning of the houses. Seán Leavy's house survived!

## **What was the Impact of Ambush?**

The effect of the ambush was huge. It was the most successful ambush in Roscommon. The enemy had been wiped out (Captain Peek, his second-in-command Lieutenant Tennant and 4 soldiers) without a single Volunteer casualty and the Irish had secured much needed arms. This showed the IRA in Roscommon that they had the ability to ambush and to defeat British men in arms. It was a great boost to the Volunteers.

The Scramogue ambush also served to throw the Crown Forces into disarray. The very peculiar behaviour of the second lorry containing Tans on that morning convinced the military that the Tans had suspected an ambush and had let Captain Peek and his men go to their death. Its failure to come to their aid confirmed their suspicions. From one of my interviews, I discovered that the Black and Tans could well have been tipped off by an anonymous phone call made from the local bank branch. Relations between the RIC and British military became strained as a result. This fact was exploited by the Irish Volunteers who followed up the ambush with further attacks. These dealt a hammer blow to the already low morale of the Crown Forces and boosted the War of Independence effort.

## Some Interesting Images



An historical map of the Scramogue area showing the old Strokestown-Longford road before it was upgraded and widened.



Outside the imposing entrance to Strokestown Park House, the home of the British military during the War of Independence

Outside the former RIC Barracks in Strokestown occupied by the RIC and Black and Tans in 1921

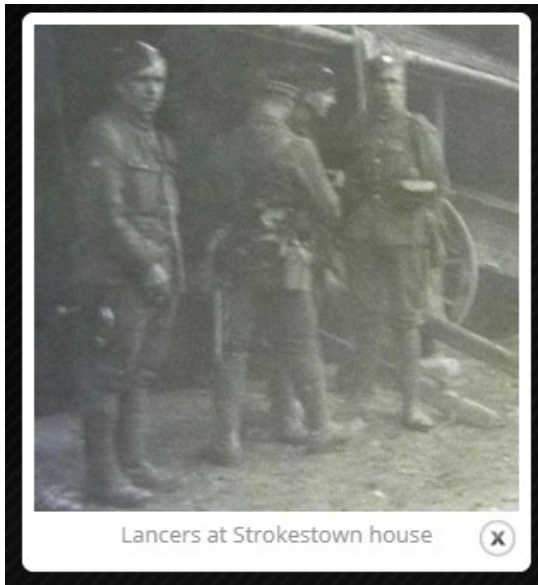




With Jim Ganly, local historian, PJ Hunt and Mattie Gorman at the burial site of Constable Evans in Cloonboney Bog



Our local politician, Senator Eugene Murphy, remembers his granddad and all those who took part in the ambush.



Lancers at Strokestown house



Badge of the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers



Outside Strokestown Park House. According to my local historian, the Lancers' Gymnasium is through the large archway. The mural of the Lancers' Coat of Arms can still be seen on the wall there.

## The Kilgefin Volunteers

Years and years have passed and gone, good and great men too,  
but the memory of those Volunteers remains forever true.

Through all those years of woe and tears they bravely took this stand —  
they fought against the Saxon foe to free our native land.

They proudly fought and nobly died, oh they knew not any fears.

They were from Roscommon South Battalion, the Kilgefin Volunteers.

Two miles east of Strokestown on Spy Wednesday at the dawn  
these gallant men assembled 'neath the crest of ol' Sliabh Bawn.

T'was called the Scramogue Ambush where Captain Peake was shot,  
but Ashbrook was the venue, right well I know the spot.

They conquered their oppressors and filled their hearts with fear.

They were from Roscommon South Battalion, the Kilgefin Volunteers.

Their Captain brave but young in years yet old in Ireland's woes,  
his lifeblood he would freely give to rid Her of these foes.

The boys all followed after him o'er hillside, valley, and glen.

Well fitted was this warrior bold to command his gallant men.

He led them safe o'er bower and creek and knew not any fears.

They were from Roscommon South Battalion, the Kilgefin Volunteers.

Oh, the Black and Tans came over, and little did they care  
what torture they would inflict on us. But you bet they got their share!  
Rejoice, you sons of Erin's Isle, lie glad as well you may.

You fought the foe for liberty and proudly held their sway.

You drove those hirelings from our land 'mid sorrow, shame, and tears.

You were from Roscommon South Battalion, the Kilgefin Volunteers.

God rest the souls of those heroes bold! The bravest of the brave  
who from those greedy ravengers our lives and homes did save.  
What hardship great they did endure, those brave and fearless men.  
From kindred dear they had to flee o'er mountain, bog, and glen.  
Yet they always met united! So let's give three lofty cheers  
to Roscommon South Battalion heroes, the Kilgefin Volunteers.

Written by Kathleen Murray of Ballyduffy, Strokestown

Tribute to the Kilgefin Volunteers who participated in the Scramogue Ambush

## Michael Mullooly

Kiltristan now is wrapped in gloom  
at the death of a hero brave.  
Mullooly bold has met his doom,  
and now lies in his grave.

Once more we feel the tyrant's hand  
that crushed this warrior gay.  
May God forgive the Saxon band  
that came the road that day.

His house was soon surrounded  
by a cowardly, murderous gang,  
And Michael's life was ended  
by a coward's shot that rang.

He fell beside his homestead dear  
where happy hours spent he,  
where often careless childhood cheers,  
he prayed for Ireland free.

For days and years he fought and  
prayed  
to right his native land.  
But now, alas, the price is paid  
by a hero's death so grand.

His glory rolls from shore to shore  
although he sleeps in clay.  
The price of all his deed will soar  
and live from day to day.

As Commandant of our Irish ranks  
and a hero of the corps,  
he nobly died, God rest his soul,  
We ne'er shall see him more.

So now farewell, oh a long farewell  
to a hero brave and true.  
T'was in the prime of life you fell  
for the cause of Róisín Dubh.

Tribute to Michael Mullooly who was killed by RIC in retaliation for the Scramogue Ambush



War of Independence memorial at Shankhill, Elphin which includes the name of Michael Mullooly



At Kiltrustan Graveyard, burial place of Michael Mullooly



**Scramogue Ambush** participants: Compiled from personal interviews; Luke Duffy interview, Ernie O'Malley Papers, UCD Archives; Pat Brennan Papers, private collection; various Volunteer Witness Statements; and *Raids and Rallies* by Ernie O'Malley.

Participants named by Luke Duffy: Pat Madden, Luke Duffy, Frank Simons, John Gibbons, Jim Tiernan, Peter Collins, Tom Madden, Michael Collins, Jimmy McDermott, John McDermott, Michael Gibbons, William Hanley, Frank Egan, Paddy Tiernan, Dick Simons, Peter Connolly, Dick "Cushy" Hughes, Pat Fitzpatrick, Michael Fitzpatrick, Pat Mullooly, Peter Farrell, Martin O'Connor and Hugh Keegan.

Ernie O'Malley names Ned Cooney, Quartermaster of the Longford Brigade as being present. (Descendants of men in the ambush, however, do not remember hearing about Cooney being with the Volunteers that day.)

Pat Brennan Papers cite these participants: Brian Nangle, John Kelly (of Muckinagh, Strokestown), Joseph and John Diffley, Eugene Kearns, Michael Greene, John J. Robinson, Michael Walsh, Luke Feeney, Dan Madden (Carniska Coy.), Michael Gunn, Henry Compton, Bill Mulligan, Peter Shiel, John Farrell, Patrick Moran, Charles Noone, Peter Casey, (another) Peter Casey, James Lynagh, Thomas Kelly, Pat Maleady (Mulleady), Martin Fallon, James Shiel, Michael Casey, Richard Hayden, James Kelly (of Scramogue), Peter Lynch, Michael and James O'Neill, William Collins, Patrick Walsh, and Michael Gill.

Men cutting communication wires and blocking roads: Pat and Michael Toolan, Patrick O'Connor, Joseph Stewart, James Hanley, Thomas Smyth, Patrick Cox, Patrick James Gunn, John Healy, Michael Madden, Dan Hanley, Patrick Greene. Hugh McDermott and Patrick Murray served as armed guards for the axemen, while Pat Fallon, Joseph Fallon, James Nelson, Thomas Casey, Michael Hunt, Peter Spalding, Frank Reilly, Thomas Dillon, John Farrell, Bernard Gavican, Francis Farrell, Michael Gearty, Michael Doorley, Tom Murray, and Martin Shiel served as outposts. According to the Volunteer Witness Statement of Sean Leavy, he was at the ambush site in the early hours but had walked back towards Longford to check on the road block. By the time he returned to the ambush site, the shooting had ceased.

Thomas Brady in his Volunteer Witness Statement claims that he, Tim Caulfield, and Michael Tiernan from Kiltristan Company were serving as outposts on the Strokestown/Elphin Road at Cregga about six miles from Scramogue.

The Volunteer Witness Statement of Martin Fallon claims that Capt. Jack Murphy of Scramogue Company was present, as does the manuscript of Tommy Loughran, *An Old Soldier's Memories*.

Tommy Loughran's manuscript also places James Casey and James Murphy at the scene. He also claims that he and his brother Jack were involved blocking roads.

A hand-written copy of William Nugent's summary of war activities includes his claim to acting as an outpost for the Scramogue Ambush.

Post Script: Sean Leavy in *I.R.A. in the Fight for Freedom* claims that thirty-nine men were present, although he does not name them. The private papers of Pat Brennan, Brigade O/C in the North during the Civil War, indicate between 40-60 men were engaged in some capacity.

List of participants in the Scramogue Ambush – about 40 to 60 men were involved.

## Bibliography

Front Page Roscommon Herald . (1920, October 16). Retrieved from <http://archive.irishnewsarchive.com> in Roscommon County Library Archives

Doherty, Gabriel (2010) *With the IRA in the Fight for Freedom - 1919 to the Truce*. Mercier Press

Ganly, J. (2021, March 20th). *Local Historian*. (Gerald Greene, Interviewer)

Hegarty Thorne, K. (2005). *They Put The Flag a-Flyin' - The*

Leavy, Sean (1954, June 2<sup>nd</sup>) <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/onlinecollections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0954.pdf>

Mullooly, Patrick (1954, June 3<sup>rd</sup>) <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0955.pdf>

O'Callaghan, M. (2012). *For Ireland and Freedom - Roscommon's Contribution to the Fight for Independence*. Mercier Press.

O'Malley, Ernie (2011). *Raids and Rallies*. Mercier Press.

Owens, Henry (2012). *Roscommon Life Magazine - 'The Troubles in Roscommon 91 Years Ago'*

Simons, Frank (1952, December 2<sup>nd</sup>) <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0770.pdf>

<https://thewildgeese.irish/profiles/blogs/the-scramogue-ambush-roscommon-steps-up>

Podcast: <https://poddtoppen.se/podcast/1503109266/history-ireland/the-wests-awake-revolution-in-roscommon-1916-1921>

## Acknowledgements

There are a number of people I wish to thank for helping me with my research:

- Jim Ganly, my local historian, who gave of his time freely to tell me about the ambush, guided me to good primary and secondary sources of information to use and who brought it to life for me by organising visits to the various sites of interest.
- Dolores Neary, a granddaughter of Sean Leavy, O/C of the North Battalion. She kindly agreed to meet me at the ambush site and shared personal recollections and documents relating to the event and its aftermath.
- Senator Eugene Murphy gave of his time willingly to talk about his memories of his granddad's involvement and the impact of the ambush on his locality. He also brought the event to life through his reading of Martin Fallon's account of the ambush.
- My family, especially my grandmother Agnes Carley and my granduncle John Nerney, who gave me newspaper cuttings and local folklore on the ambush.
- Meliosa McIntyre and Mary Costello, local history section of Roscommon County Library, who researched the archives of the local newspapers and helped me to find out more about the Ambush.
- Mattie Gorman and PJ Hunt who took us to the burial place of Constable Evans in Cloonboney bog.