The ‘Decade of Centenaries’
All-island history competition for primary and post-primary schools

Template cover sheet which must be included at the front of all projects

Title of project:

*When the Black and Tans Came Calling to our School*

“Our Earliest School Inspections, 1920-1921”

Category for which you wish to be entered (i.e. ‘Decade of Centenaries’, biography, local/regional, or national (including social/cultural) Issues

“Decade of Centenaries”

Name(s) of class / group of students / individual student submitting the project:

Transition Year History Class 3 (T.Y.P. 3)

School roll number (this should be provided if possible):

63310T

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When the Black and Tans Came Calling to our School

“Our Earliest School Inspections, 1920-1921”

“If a police barracks is burned or if the barracks already occupied is not suitable, then the best house in the locality is to be commandeered, the occupants thrown into the gutter. Let them die there—the more the merrier. Should the order (“Hands Up”) not be immediately obeyed, shoot and shoot with effect. If the persons approaching (a patrol) carry their hands in their pockets, or are in any way suspicious-looking, shoot them down. You may make mistakes occasionally and innocent persons may be shot, but that cannot be helped, and you are bound to get the right parties some time. The more you shoot, the better I will like you, and I assure you no policeman will get into trouble for shooting any man.”

—Lt. Col. Smyth, June 1920

Perhaps these very direct and most disturbing of orders given by Lieutenant Colonel Gerald Brice Ferguson Smyth, British Army officer and police officer in June 1920 leaves very little to the imagination. He was at that time Divisional Commander for all Munster, and one-armed veteran of the Great War (The London Gazette, November, 1914). These chilling commands set the scene for this study and demonstrate the dangers faced by innocent people from the R.I.C. and Black and Tans during this very troubled period in our history as Colonel Smyth defiantly declared:

“the more you shoot, the better I will like you.”

It is at this particular juncture that our story begins because as a result of examining in detail the Annals of the Convent of Mercy belonging to our school at St. Joseph’s Rochfortbridge, Co. Westmeath for the years 1920-1921 that we discovered a number of disturbing incidents relating to the Black and Tans in the village and in particular their efforts to commandeer: “the best house in the locality”, the Convent of Mercy at St. Joseph’s. The annals were a hand-written yearly account or diary of life in the convent and thankfully of local and national events of the day and their significance for the purpose of this study is paramount. Each year the then Bishop of Meath on a visit would read and sign the annals as an accurate portrayal of life in the convent. Fortunately none of the above scenarios were ever played out to the chilling conclusions of Colonel Smyth’s orders, but nonetheless one certainly detects an air of concern and uncertainty and no little prayer during those “troubled days” when reading through the pages of this most informative of primary source material.
According to D.M. Leeson in his book “The Black & Tans”, it is stated that: “the Black and Tans were large numbers of unemployed ex-servicemen in post-war Britain-young men with both military training and combat experience”. These British recruits during the War of Independence 1919-1921 were given the name the Black and Tans (na Dúchrónaigh) after a famous pack of Black and Tan hounds from the Scarteen area on the Limerick/Tipperary border. This can easily be verified by sifting through the Irish Times Digital Archives as there are many references made of these type of point to point meetings, particulary in the 1911-1912 period and this proves beyond doubt that these horses and hounds pre-date our subject matter by a number of years.

The idea for the Black and Tans came from Winston Churchill who was the then Secretary of State for War in Great Britain in 1919 and who later as Prime-Minister would steer Britain successfully through World War II, 1939-1945. The Black and Tans were brought in to Ireland to assist the armed police force the Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.) who will later play a larger part in our story. According to Richard Bennett in his book also called “The Black and Tans”, we find out how these soldiers were going to be paid for their work when he stated that: “the advertised wage of ten shillings a day and all found was a princely sum in the troubled and hungry “twenties”.

As there were not enough dark green R.I.C. uniforms to clothe them they appeared in what Richard Bennett described as a: “strange medley of khaki (a light shade of yellow\ brown) and dark green, some with civilian hats, but most with the green caps and black leather belts of the R.I.C.”

However, of much more concern to us was the fact that their morale had not been improved by months of unemployment since the ending of World War I and also because the R.I.C. officers whom they now served under in Ireland had no great powers of military discipline over them. According to www.warofindependence.info, we see that: “among the myths perpetuated about the Black and Tans were stories handed down in Ireland that they were all jail birds and convicts”, this was simply not true, and this source goes on to further state that: “while it was very good propaganda it was very unlikely that any of the recruis were in jail”. In total from early January 1919 to the end of December 1922 there were a total of 9,762 men admitted who would come under the category of Black and Tan, most of these ex-servicemen were from the greater London area as most of the early recruiting went on there before spreading out to other centres around Great Britain. In a further section on this website and under the heading: “Distribution of Irish Born Black & Tans”, it was interesting to find out that five Irish born Black and Tans came from Co. Westmeath. Nonetheless, there can be no escaping the fact that on arriving in Ireland the Black and Tans became renowned for their attacks on civilians and civilian property.

In the year 1920, Rochfortbridge was made up of approximatley two thousand inhabitants. Historically the village evolved around a river crossing over the river Derry. Droichead Chaisiltéan Loiste, the Gaelic name for Rochfortbridge is anglicised as Castlelost Bridge. It is believed there was a delousing station there during the Great Famine, 1845-1850. The village itself had been set out by Robert Rochfort (1651-1727) who was an MP for Westmeath. As part of the village building programme, Rochfort gave the money for the building of a new bridge over the river Derry. This bridge gave the village its name, Rochfortbridge.
On the 21st August 1862 three professed Sisters left Tullamore to found a convent in Rochfortbridge. They were Sr. Gertrude Dunne (Superior), Sr. Stanislaus O’Neill and Sr. Magdalene Hackett. They were later joined by Eliza Fielding a convert to Catholicism. From the pages of “To Serve With Gladness” published in 2012 to coincide with the celebrations of one hundred and fifty years of the Sisters of Mercy in Rochfortbridge we see how unconventional this site may have been for a convent because in this book it states that:

“the village of Rochfortbridge was peculiarly Protestant and had a large percentage of admirers of William of Orange. Many a lively skirmish took place between the “Orange” and the “Green”. Interestingly, Eliza Fielding a local Protestant girl who joined the order of Mercy in Tullamore in 1861 eventually returned to Rochfortbridge in 1864 and took the name of Mother Mary Paul. To this day she is remembered with great fondness among the Sisters as a valiant woman. Her story is one of legend and it is recalled in an 1925 edition titled: “Life Story of a Valiant Woman” written by Sr. M. Gertrude because of the “greater challenge” she undertook as Sr. Mary Paul left for the Australian outback in August 1875 along with Sr. Bernard Grennan and Sr. Alacoque McLoughlin. On arriving there they established convents in the most remotest of places such as Yass, Tumut, Wilcannia-Forbes and Murrumburrah in New South Wales.

In relation to other important issues pertaining to the problems within the county at this time, we found that Russell W. Shortt in his on-line thesis: “IRA activity in Westmeath, 1918-1921”, stated that: “there had being a total of thirty-two R.I.C. barracks in Westmeath in 1918, but by the end of the War of Independence this number had being exactly halved to sixteen, thus leaving large areas of the county unpolicied”. For such policing purposes, the county was divided into four districts - Mullingar with nine stations, Athlone with six, Castlepollard with nine and Moate with eight. Rochfortbridge would have been one of the nine stations within the Mullingar district and while we read of an attack on Rochfortbridge R.I.C. barracks in this same report, no exact date for it was given. Again Russell Shortt goes on to explain in his thesis that: “there is evidence to support the idea that there did exist a core of very radical Volunteers (I.R.A.) who were willing to take life and to endanger their own, to achieve a Republic. However they were isolated from the general public, because of their methods. Apart from the hotbeds of activity - Kilbeggan, Moate, Castlepollard, Mullingar and Athlone, the rest of the county was satisfied with minor acts of defiance. There is no doubt that Sinn Fein had widespread support throughout the county and that an anti-British feeling was prevalent”. Little wonder then that the Black and Tans would find themselves in Co. Westmeath attempting to deal with these hotbeds of activity and minor acts of defiance.
The Royal Irish Constabulary (Constáblacht Ríoga na hÉireann) as earlier mentioned were the armed police force of the United Kingdom in Ireland that served here from 1836 until 1922. As a result of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, the R.I.C. was disbanded in 1922 and was replaced by the Garda Síochána in the Irish Free State and by the Royal Ulster Constabulary in Northern Ireland. In fact according to an edition of the History Ireland magazine (Issue 3 Autumn, 2004), and titled: “Who were the Black-And-Tans”? we worringly read that: “the Black-and-Tans and Auxiliaries helped to destroy residual community support for the R.I.C.”. Yet according to the census returns of 1901 and 1911 we noted with some interest that the R.I.C. barracks at Rochfortbridge was policed by Irish born officers.

In 1901 the number of officers in Rochfortbridge was given as six but by 1911 this figure had reduced down to two. Interestingly, the census return forms (Form H) for Military \ R.I.C. in Barracks were designed in such away so as not to reveal the identity of the officers as the initials of each officer was all that was required. These returns also show that the officers came from all over Ireland and were for the most part Roman Catholic. In the census column to be filled out under “particular Profession, Trade or other Employment before Enlistment or appointment”, most stated that they were “farmer's sons”.

In comparison when viewing the census return forms for 1901 and 1911 of the Convent of Mercy, we see that the Sisters filled out what was known as a Family Form (Form A) which was described as: “those who slept or abode in this house” on census night. In both the census of 1901 and 1911, we can see that the nuns gave employment to three servants with the name of Bridget Lambe appearing on both returns.
Nonetheless, it was from our study of the annals of the convent that we got our deepest insights into the atmosphere that seemed to have been impacting on life in 1920-1921 war-torn Ireland. For example we read of instances where: “the Black and Tans were guilty of great cruelty.....many were shot without any reason and many more imprisoned without cause....lorry loads of Black and Tans with rifles were constantly passing and many shots were fired”. In each particular extract from the accounts of the Sisters we read of impending dangers and forebodings. Also from this first extract we read: “on a few occasions the Sisters who were in the grounds narrowly escaped being hit by bullets, and often shots were fired from the Barracks and every light sent out”.

This account can easily be verified because when viewing a 1914 map of Rochfortbridge, the old R.I.C. barracks and field where the Black and Tans according to the annals: “camped for the night” can easily be pointed out and will be looked at later in a more recent map.

Between the years 1919-1921, Ireland was badly war-torn and because of this ongoing conflict the census of 1921 was regrettably not taken but it is to the annals we go again to provide us with some telling insights into the precise fears and terror that the dreaded “knock on the door” would have caused in those uneasy days.

In a very powerful extract we read of this great concern: “The Sisters in St. Joseph’s were terrified one night, a number of lorries stopped in the village and some of the Black & Tans came to the door and hammered on it to get in”, and unfortunately this kind of occurrence seemed to have taken place on more than one occasion. One can only try to imagine the fear that must have been generated by this all too frequent harassment. It must also be borne in mind that at this time these buildings in St. Joseph’s were not only the home of a Mercy Convent but were also a boarding school for Deaf \ Mute girls from all over Ireland that operated there between the years 1892-1940. The Sisters also ran the National School for girls and this school was part-boarding at this time.
In a poem from an unknown source and an unknown year titled: “The Black and Tans” this fear that the nuns must have felt and vividly portrayed in these extracts can almost be heard from these lines:

“In the hush of the night when the curfew tolls
And the churchyard’s yawning upheave men’s souls
Hark! A rattle of wheels on the cobble stones
And heedless of churches and dead men’s bones
With an armoured car leading and massed in vans
Come the “devil-may-cares” called the Black and Tans”

(Unknown)

On another occasion and from another particular page from the writings of the nuns a certain Colonel Cooper came to our attention and he became a very interesting character in our story as we found he had quite a distinguished career with the British Army. This piece from the annals plainly states that during a Black and Tan round-up of the district while: “searching for I.R.A. who were wanted” goes on to state that:

“Colonel Cooper, a retired British Officer and his wife were in the neighbourhood, and had to remain with all the others”.

It seems quite ironic then that he should have been “on the other end” of a Black and Tan round-up within our community and school, the Black and Tans hardly realising at the time that they had “captured” a retired Major General of the Royal Fusiliers, City of London Regiment!!

On further research we found that he was born Edward Joshua Cooper on 21st April, 1858, eldest son of Colonel J H Cooper also of the Royal Fusiliers seen here in this cartoon on horseback and remembered in verse by the Westmeath Hunt. They lived in Dunboden House located to the South of Mullingar and to the northwest of Rochfortbridge. Colonel Edward Joshua our subject and as our verse suggests spent a lot of his life “soldiering over the water” for we found that between 1886-1887 he served in the Sudan and in the South African Boer War from 1899 to 1902. He also saw a lot of service during World War I 1914-1918. He retired on 5th January 1918 and for his distinguished service was awarded the Queen’s medal with five clasps and the King’s medal with two clasps. He married a Miss Effie Balmain, they had no children and he died in 1945. Sadly we read from an Irish Independent newspaper report dated 14th April 1927 and titled: “Incendiarism at Mullingar”, that Dunboden House was later burned to the ground, the Coopers having sold the house in 1922.

(The King and The Queen’s Medals)
Another present and honourably noted during these frightening “inspections” carried out by the Black and Tans was the name of Fr. Kelly: “Fr. Kelly very kindly came along and allowed them to stay in Parochial House. They left next day after a fruitless search”. This evidence seems to indicate quite clearly that Fr. Kelly’s intervention on the part of the Sisters on that particular occasion could have prevented a more serious incident from taking place. According to the “History of the Diocese of Meath, 1860-1993”, Fr. James Kelly was “ordained in Maynooth College on 7th June 1870”, we also read here that after serving in many parishes in the diocese of Meath that his final mission was as Parish Priest in Rochfortbridge from the 3rd March 1913 until his death on the 22nd February 1921.

In this 2014 map of Rochfortbridge, not so much has changed in the general environs of the convent from the 1914 map of the previous one hundred years. It is easy to visualise how the Sisters with some justification could complain of: “shots being fired over their heads”.

Also from this most recent map can be gained some indication as to the layout and the geography of where these incidents took place so long ago. It is easy to see almost precisely from this map where the nuns reported that: “the soldiers camped for the night in the field opposite St. Joseph’s and the officers examined the Schools and St. Joseph’s to see would they suit for them”.

From an aerial photograph \ postcard produced by Aero-Views Ltd. Dublin in the early 1960’s we can also get a reasonable indication as to how close the buildings in our story were to each other. In the left background of the photograph one can see in ruins exactly the site of where the old R.I.C. barracks once stood in relation to the Convent.

On the site of the old R.I.C. barracks today stands the local St. Joseph’s the Worker Parish Hall a collaborative effort built by the residents of the parish of Rochfortbridge and opened in the late 1960’s.
In another part of these accounts it was also revealed that these searches were carried out in the wider parish.
For example we read of where: “Many houses in the parish were raided and four parishioners were imprisoned in a tiny cell in the barracks for a considerable time. We supplied a dinner to them each day. Rev. Mother spoke to Dr. Keelan about their condition.” These fears we read of were certainly to be taken very seriously for again it is written here that: “Things were so bad that the Bishops issued a statement setting forth some of the atrocities committed”, the nuns prayed for: “every blessing spiritual & temporal for our beloved country”.

As part of a Research Study Report for the Leaving Certificate History Examination in 2010, past-pupil, Colm Muldoon went into even greater detail when explaining the kind of atrocities that were being carried out in Co. Westmeath, and in it we read: “As 1920 progressed; the Black and Tans began to use this tactic (the destruction of property) as a form of reprisal for crimes committed against British authorities. A prime example of this began with the killing of Col-Cmdt Lambert and the wife of Colonel Challoner as they travelled through Glasson, Co. Westmeath. It is believed that the original intention of the I.R.A. men was to hold the passengers hostage to bargain the release of the leader of the Longford I.R.A., and that the deaths were “accidental”. The Black and Tans retaliated by burning a total of five farmhouses in Coosan, before moving on to Mount Temple to burn the home of Anne Heavey, whose son was a member of the I.R.A. This act of revenge was on a scale which had never been witnessed in the war so far, and fully illustrates my claim – that acts of reprisal were nearly always disproportionate to the events which brought them about the best example being the events of Bloody Sunday. The I.R.A. would react by burning Moydrum Castle, with one of the raiders, who were dressed in “civilian attire”, even telling Lady Castlemaine who was home at the time: “We are burning your house as a reprisal of the recent burnings at Coosan and Mount Temple”.

This is further borne out in a book titled: “Terror in Ireland 1916-1923”, a series of essays edited by David Fitzpatrick and where on page 152 we read from a table described as: “Fatalities by County of Death, 1917-1921”, that there were eighteen fatalities in Co. Westmeath these numbers including “I.R.A., policemen, civilians and soldiers”. The imprint and significance of these events of 1920-1921 on this local community and our school cannot be underestimated and leaves one with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the way life was in the Ireland of 1919-1921. Given that these incidents happened in some of the places we are familiar with and can see every day makes it much easier to imagine how difficult and different life was like both in the village and for the Sisters during those years.

This study has also left us with a number of unanswered questions and with a lot of food for thought particularly concerning the main characters in this story.
What if Colonel Cooper and his wife had not been in Rochfortbridge on the night of the “round-up” in the locality, could it have led to a more serious incident? What if Fr. James Kelly the local Parish Priest on another occasion had not offered the Black and Tans accommodation in the Parochial House, by doing this, did he save the nuns from an uncertain future? What if Dr. Keelan had not intervened on the part of the four prisoners held captive in the local R.I.C. barracks in Rochfortbridge, did he save their lives by making a complaint to the Military Authorities who later had them transferred to Athlone?

(“The View From Inside The Convent Door” c.1900)
Perhaps British writer and historian Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) summed up all controversies better than anyone when he said: “war does not determine who is right – only who is left”. So what of those who were “left” in this story?

Colonel Smyth, who at the start of our essay had advised on a “shoot on sight” policy in June 1920, did not have long to live after issuing such an order. Alas, Smyth's instructions marked him out for attention from the IRA.

The following month while in Cork he took lodgings at the Cork & County Club, an Anglo-Irish Social Club. On the evening of the 17th July 1920, he was in the smoking room of this Club when a six-man IRA team entered and said to him: “Colonel, were not your orders to shoot on sight? Well you are in sight now, so prepare.” Colonel Smyth jumped to his feet; his struggle was but a short one. He was thirty-four years old. The Coopers as already mentioned eventually sold the lands and estate at Dunboden and moved to England.

Fr. James Kelly P.P. of Rochfortbridge died very shortly after these incidents had taken place in February 1921 and in the annals his passing was greatly mourned by the nuns whom they regarded as: “a great priest and a wonderful preacher”.

Dr. P.J. Keelan seen here (seated in front) in this photograph remained on as a well liked and respected GP in the Mullingar area for many years afterwards until his retirement in the mid-1950’s. The Sisters in Rochfortbridge remain there to this day and because of their determination in the face of adversity during those by-gone Black and Tan raids of 1920-1921 may now serve as a reminder that the school “inspections” of the future may not be as daunting as those that have gone in the past.

“From Dublin to Cork and from Thurles to Mayo,
Lies a trail of destruction wherever they go,
With England to help and fierce passions to fan,
She must feel very proud of her bould Black an’ Tan”

The Bould “Black & Tan” (Unknown)
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