

**Template cover sheet which must be included at the front of all 2016 Decade of Centenaries  
History competition entries**

**Title of project:**

The Execution of Thomas Whelan and the Burning of Clifden.

**Category for which you wish to be entered (i.e. 1916, World War 1; Women in the Revolutionary Period, local/regional category):**

Local/regional category

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

Grace King

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

71300M

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Co. na Gaillimhe.

**Class teacher's name (this must be provided even for projects submitted by a group of pupils or an individual pupil):**

Genevieve Faherty

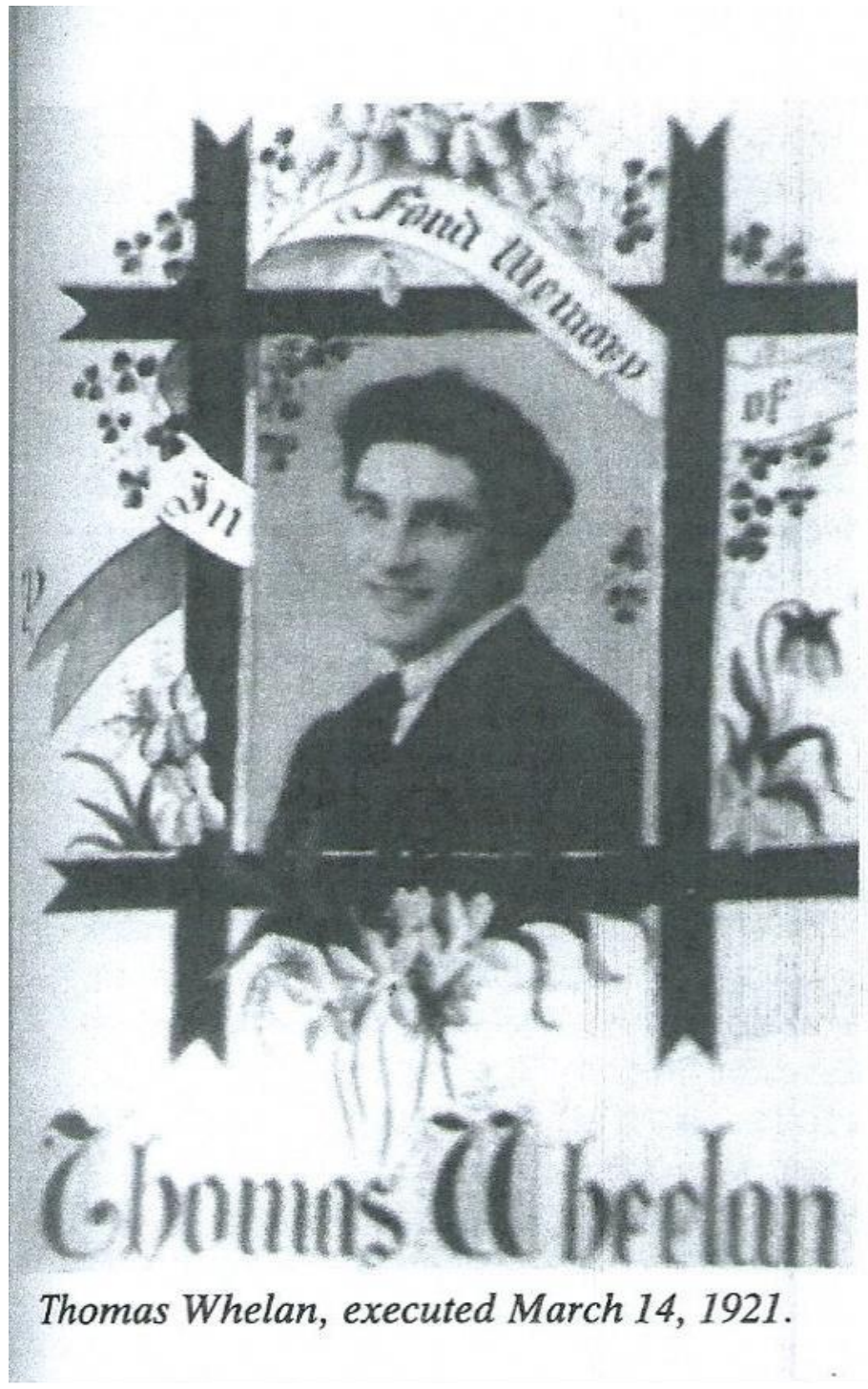
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# The Execution of Thomas Whelan and the Burning of Clifden.



(Fig. 1)

## Introduction:

When the Act of Union was passed in 1800, Ireland was ruled by Britain, leaving Ireland unable to have its own government and freedom. Many attempts had been made over the years for freedom, including the rebellions of 1641, 1798 and the Easter Rising of 1916. These uprisings, along with others, failed, but Ireland eventually gained her freedom, following the, The War of Independence and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

However, this did not end the bloodshed in Ireland. Families and friends, and even communities would become split in the years that followed. Civil war occurred from 1922 to 1923. Ireland at this time was a very troubled country.

In my project, I will talk about Thomas Whelan, a Clifden native, who was executed for a murder, which it is widely believed he did not commit. I strongly believe that Thomas Whelan was an innocent man. Also, I will talk about The Burning of Clifden, my home town, and how Whelan's execution contributed to it.

## Thomas Whelan's Story:

### Thomas' Background:

Thomas Whelan, a young man born on the Sky Road, just outside Clifden in October 1899, was born into a family of thirteen children. After completing his National School Programme, he left school and worked on the family farm for a short while. In 1918, at the age of eighteen, he moved to Dublin and worked at Broadstone Railway Station for the Midland and Great Western Railway. It is known to be definite that he joined the Irish Volunteers while in Dublin, and it is possible that he was a member while in Clifden, but it is not certain. His

nephew has said that Thomas 'got involved, like most who were inclined' and he joined the C. Company Dublin Brigade.

## Bloody Sunday and his Arrest:

Bloody Sunday occurred on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November 1920. On this day in Dublin, twelve British Intelligence agents and two policeman were killed, by Republican forces. In retaliation, British forces opened fire in Croke Park killing fourteen civilians, including the Tipperary player, Michael Hogan.

Soon after these events, four men were arrested for the murder of Captain G.T. Baggelly, at 119 Lower Baggot St. on the morning of Bloody Sunday. Young Thomas Whelan was one of the four men charged with the murder on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January, along with M.J. Tobin, J. McNamara and J. Boyce.

## The Case:

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of February, the case was held at City Hall, Dublin, and came before a General Court Martial. Whelan pleaded that he was an innocent man and it is still believed to this day by the Whelan family and others, that he was indeed an innocent man.

Evidence was given for the prosecution of the men and witnesses gave their accounts of what happened. Two witnesses, an army officer living with his wife in the same house as Captain G.T. Baggelly, and a soldier who had heard shots while on the street and then saw the four alleged men.



*Thomas Whelan, escorted to Court by R.I.C.  
and a Black and Tan.*

(Fig. 2)

## Evidence:

- **Army Officer:** The Army Officer told the Court that he was in the bathroom shaving, and heard footsteps coming up the hall. He was then confronted by two men, as they saw him in the bathroom. They forced him to put his hands over his head. The Officer identified Whelan, stating he aimed a revolver at him. He then told the Court that Boyce walked in and out of the room. A housemaid was also present, and she was pushed into the bathroom, along with the Officer. The housemaid was never called to give evidence to the Court. The Army Officer then stated he heard shots coming from the Captain's bedroom and four men then

passed the open door and left, although he was unable to identify these men. After they left, he returned to the Captain, but he was dead.

- **Soldier:** The Soldier told the Court that he was on his way down Lower Baggot Street when he heard shots, but was unable to identify the whereabouts the shots had come from. As he slowed down, he saw a group of men coming from number 119, Lower Baggot Street. After this he named McNamara in this group. Later on, he again saw this group of men around Herbert Place. He said they were 'stretched across the road with revolvers'. He told the Court that they ordered him off his bike and to leave, but as he left he was called back and they pointed a revolver at him. They brought the Soldier to No. 38 Mount Street. In this group of men, the Soldier identified McNamara and Tobin, and also Whelan, who was apparently trying to start the bike.

## Defence for Whelan:

- **Mr. Williamson:** Mr. Williamson acted on behalf of Thomas Whelan. He stated that Whelan's defence was an alibi and that Thomas was not present at the scene. Evidence would show this. Also he said that he was not the type of person that would murder someone, 'the boy was a weekly communicant and not the class of man that murders were made of'.

Mr. Williamson also declared that the officer's maid was not brought forward for evidence as 'she could not corroborate the evidence of the others as regards identification'. (*Irish Independent*, February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1921).



## The Case continued on February 2<sup>nd</sup>:

- **Whelan's Landlady:** Thomas' Landlady told the Court that he went to the 9 am mass at Ringsend Church, which she said was a five minute walk, and he returned at 10 am. Mass was roughly forty minutes long. After this he had breakfast and went back to his room. She did not see him until dinner, which was at 3 pm. She stated that the hospital on Baggot Street was approximately twenty-five or thirty minutes from her house.
- **Young Lady:** A young lady who lived on the same street as Thomas Whelan told the court that she saw him receiving Holy Communion and saw him leave the church at the end of mass.
- **Another Witness:** This witness stated that he passed Whelan on Ringsend Bridge. They said good morning to each other and had a quick chat.
- **Priest at Ringsend Church:** The Priest at Ringsend Church told the Court that Thomas went to mass every week, and had done for many years. He was a man who never drank and he 'bore a correct and irreproachable character'.

The prosecution raised questions as to whether or not Thomas Whelan was a member of the IRA (Irish Republican Army). Mr. Williamson strongly objected to this and said that there was no evidence to prove that assumption.

After this the prosecution doubted whether or not the defence witnesses' statements were true or not. They felt their version of events on the morning of November 21<sup>st</sup> was unreliable. The defence strongly argued this, stating it was 'grossly unfair' to have this notion as 'they belonged to a certain class and might hold certain political opinions' and they 'were prepared to come up and perjure themselves, on behalf of the prisoner'.

The Court felt that the evidence that the defence gave was not to be trusted, while the evidence of the witnesses for the prosecution was believed to be reliable. Therefore, Thomas Whelan was to be hanged.

Tobin, Boyce and McNamara were found innocent when the trial ended, while young Thomas Whelan was sentenced to death 'subject of revision' although 'had no recommendation of mercy'. (*Irish Independent*, February 10<sup>th</sup> 1921).

Mrs. Whelan went to Dublin after her son's arrest and spent many months there. She visited him while in both Kilmainham Gaol and Mount Joy Prison. He told her, 'You are not to be worried over me, mother. If I die, I die innocent.'

Whelan solemnly swore that he was an innocent man and he was not on Lower Baggot Street on the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> of November. He stated that he 'partook of the Body and Blood of his Redeemer, and that he would consider it a greater crime than murder to do that if he were guilty, and to bring Our Lord Himself to shield him.' (*Connacht Tribune*, March 12<sup>th</sup> 1921).

## The reaction of the people of Clifden:

The people of Clifden, Whelan's home town, were very sympathetic towards Thomas and the Whelan family. Attempts were made to stop the execution almost immediately, because it was firmly believed by Whelan's family, the Parish Priest of Clifden at the time, Canon McAlpine, and many of the locals of Clifden, that this young man was innocent. McAlpine tried to stop the execution by sending petitions to Dublin for Thomas. He also encouraged the locals to give great support to the Whelan family



## Canon McAlpine:

The Parish Priest in Clifden during this time, was Patrick McAlpine. He was known as Canon or Monsignor McAlpine. He was the Parish Priest from 1898 until he died in 1932. He had a great impact on the town of Clifden during the events in Ireland at this time. The locals followed him. He was very involved in politics, especially local politics. He was pro- the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), which was led by John Redmond. This party wanted Home Rule for Ireland, which was a way of Ireland having their own government, but still being a part of Britain. Foreign affairs would be dealt with by the British Government.

McAlpine was very anti-Sinn Féin, he didn't really have much support for the Irish Volunteers. The majority of people in Clifden followed the Monsignor. Therefore, at this time Clifden was in favour of getting Home Rule and Redmond's IPP, but, the events that followed changed Clifden's view on these issues.



(Fig. 3)

# The Execution:

The execution of Thomas Whelan was set for the 14<sup>th</sup> of March. The day before, saw people gather to pray and protest outside the jail. Mrs. Whelan had met her son on the Saturday before his execution, March 12<sup>th</sup>, and she said that 'you would imagine he was going to a football match, he was in such fine form'.

Thomas reassured his mother and said, 'Mother, if you were all as happy as I am, you would not worry very much. It is well known that I am innocent, and had no knowledge, hand, act or part in the tragedies of the morning of November 21<sup>st</sup>, and I am reconciled to my fate and prepared to meet my God.' He asked to be remembered to his brothers and sisters, and his father and friends and that he would pray for them in Heaven.



(Fig. 4)

His mother went to the jail again on Sunday with two women. One of these women is believed to have been his 'sweetheart'. Thomas gave them souvenirs. He gave his mother and another woman a medal and a keepsake in the shape of a ring. According to an audio of Whelan's nephew, Tommy, he sang a song to his mother that night called '*The Shawl of Galway Grey*'.

Many people praised young Thomas, stating he was the bravest man they had ever met. A priest named Father Devlin said 'he was a magnificent type of young Irishman and a regular attendant and communicant at Whitefrier Street'. Father Devlin is also quoted as saying; 'I would sooner accuse an infant of murder than Thomas Whelan'.

Afterwards, Mrs. Whelan told reporters that she would return to Clifden after everything was over and she would 'never see Dublin again.' Also she stated 'Perhaps it would have been far better if poor Tom had never seen it. It is hard to think that he should have to make the supreme sacrifice for a crime which he had neither knowledge of, hand, act, nor part in, but God's Holy Will be done'. (*Irish Independent*, March 14<sup>th</sup> 1921).

### March 14<sup>th</sup>:

The executions were to commence at 6 am on the Monday morning. Whelan was to be hanged along with six other men. They were Patrick Moran (27), Thomas Bryan (23), Patrick Doyle (28), Frank Flood (19) and Bernard Ryan (19).

Whelan and Moran, who both declared their innocence were to be hanged at 6 am. Bryan and Doyle were to be executed at 7 am. Both these men were married. At 8 am Flood and Ryan were to be executed.

The Irish Transport and General Workers Union, called for a general stoppage of work between 6 am and midday. Businesses kept their blinds, shutters and doors closed between these times, in many areas throughout the country, including Clifden, as well as in Dublin. I think this was as a mark of respect, this is done in most country towns and villages. It is done in my home town of Clifden as a mark of respect, which was also Thomas' home town.

After 5 am crowds gathered outside the prison and some say around 40,000 people soon gathered. A cold night with the stars still shining in the night's sky. Complete silence on the streets, 'not a factory whistle was heard.' 'No clang of tram, no roar or rattle of car or motor, no rumble of train – no sound of human activity disturbed the solemn silence that hung heavily over the entire city.' (*Irish Independent*, March 15<sup>th</sup> 1921.

More and more gathered outside, coming from those eerie silenced streets. Mrs. Whelan sat in a chair outside the gates of the jail. At around 5:30am a crowd began to recite the Rosary 'as Gaeilge', as they knelt down on the cold, damp ground. This crowd was bigger again at 6 am, still reciting the Rosary, up until the very last moment. At the gates, a Sacred Heart and a Blessed Virgin were placed, along with lights. A military group patrolled this area for some time.

After 5 am in the prison, Moran and Whelan attended mass which was read by Canon Waters. Canon Waters was the prison chaplain. Thomas served Communion and Auxiliary policemen and their prisoners received it. When mass ended, the executioner, named Ellis, and his assistant came in 'to make the usual preparations before the prisoners would be led for execution.' Then Whelan and Moran said goodbye and farewell to the Chaplain, policemen and the wardens.

Whelan and Moran were then brought to the execution chamber. The two young men both walked fearlessly and firmly towards the scaffold. Chaplains who attended, gave them some comforting last words. With their heads covered, the executioner approached them, and as the morning light broke at 6 am, the two innocent young men were executed.

Thomas Whelan, 'a soft country boy with a beautiful character and a nice fresh complexion' and a boy who was 'very talkative' was only twenty-two years of age. He was just a boy. (Bureau of Military History)

After the six executions, a notice was hung on the door of the prison:

**'Thomas Whelan and Patrick Moran, found guilty of murder**

**and,**

**Francis Flood, Patk. Doyle and Thomas Bryan, Bernard Ryan**

**found guilty of high treason by levying war were carried into**

**execution this morning.**

**By Order'**

*(Irish Independent, March 15<sup>th</sup> 1921).*

A relative of one of the executed men took this notice down soon afterwards. Mrs. Whelan broke down in tears around. Again, prayers were said and soon after the relatives of the men left to attend mass. Around Dublin, masses were held for the six men and in Clifden, a mass was celebrated for Thomas Whelan. The church was overflowing. It was read by Canon McAlpine. The surrounding parishes also held masses for him. The relatives of the executed men asked for

the bodies to be released to them but they never got a response. Their bodies were buried together in one big grave in Mount Joy Prison.

It wasn't until 2001, that the men were given a full state funeral. Thomas Whelan is now buried in Glasnevin Cemetery.

A letter which was later published in the press, written by young Thomas at 4:30 am before his execution goes as follows:

'We were always ready as Irishmen to die for our old cause. I am in the best of spirits now as ever. An Irishman's honour is a great pledge, so like men, we shall meet our doom this morning'

It also reads:

'Give the boys my love, tell them to follow on and never surrender. Tell them to pray for me, and I will pray for them. Tell them I'm proud to die for Ireland' –

This was the last letter he wrote. It was to the Lord Mayor of Dublin and he also thanked him for the kindness shown to his mother while she was in Dublin.

I firmly believe that Thomas Whelan was an innocent man, and that it was a case of mistaken identity, or the British felt they possibly had the murderer, but weren't quite sure. They executed him anyway, for the sake of killing someone for committing the murder Captain Baggelly.

## Clifden in the aftermath:

As a form of retaliation to Whelan's death, it is thought, two RIC (Royal Irish Constabulary) Constables were shot dead on the streets of Clifden by the IRA. Their names were Constable Charles Reynolds and Constable Thomas Sweeney. Both Irishmen, both Catholic, Reynolds from Co. Longford and Sweeney, an East Galway man. An RIC Barracks was based in Clifden at this time. Constable Reynolds died as soon as he was shot, while Constable Sweeney died on March 18<sup>th</sup> from haemorrhage and shock. It was not known who killed these men up until recently, although the Military Bureau gives a witness statement from P.J. McDonnell, who stated he was in the group of men who approached the Constables.

The locals of Clifden were not happy with this act, because the two constables were well known and liked around the town. Reynolds had been based here for quite some time, while Sweeney had been here since the previous January. The town was very sympathetic towards them. They also weren't happy that the IRA had left the town to fend for themselves after they had carried out this deed on their streets.

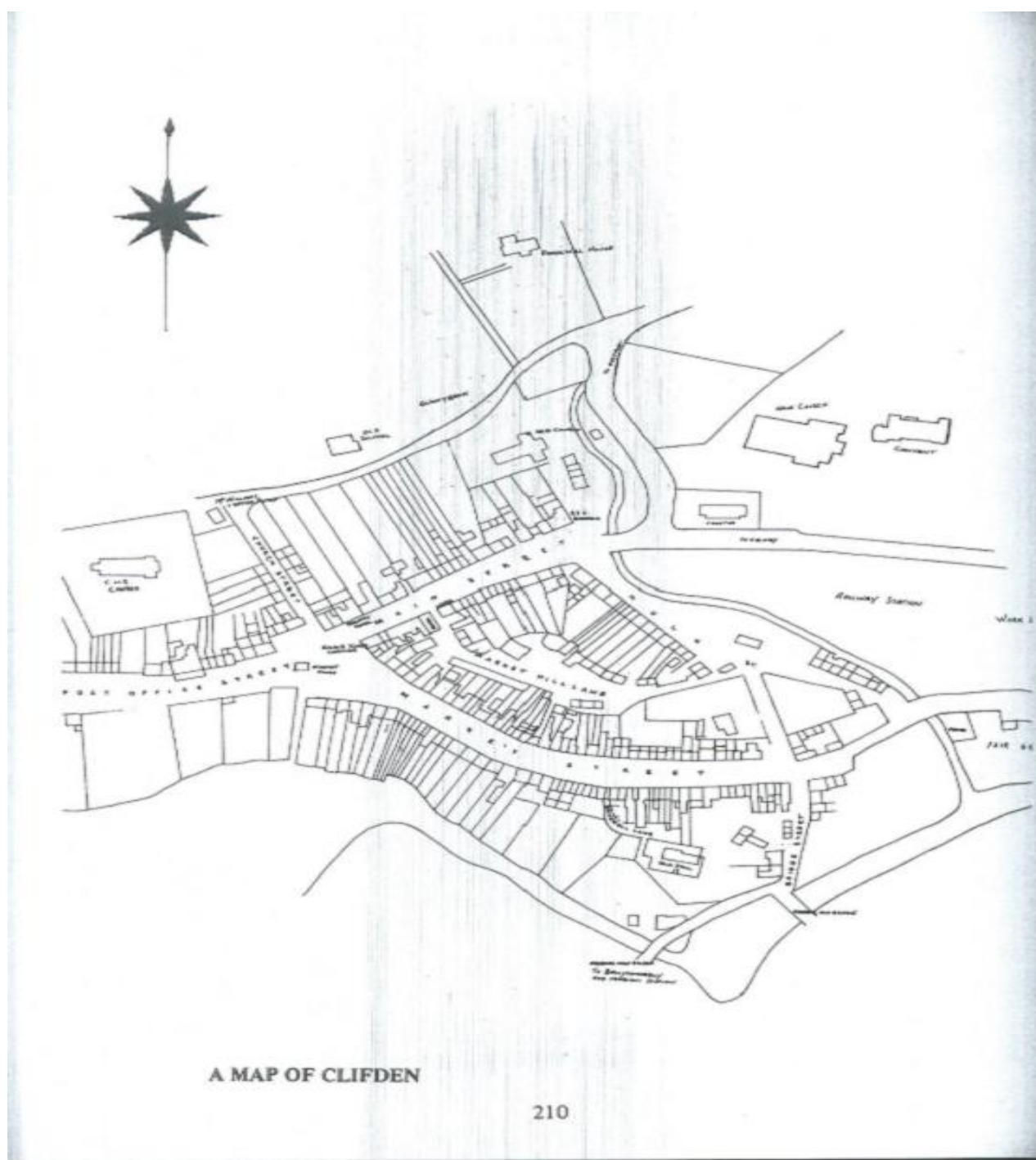
The people of Clifden were also very afraid and nervous afterwards. They knew this act would draw the Black and Tans. When this came about, they hid up in the Convent and in the Workhouse for safety and shelter. Although Clifden had, had some visits from the Black and Tans previously, with them intimidating the town and sometimes searching houses, nothing was ever as bad as their visit in the early hours of St. Patrick's Day, 1921. The town had never experienced blood-shed on its streets.



# The Burning of Clifden:

In the early hours of March 17<sup>th</sup>, a trainload of Black and Tans arrived in Clifden, from Galway after leaving at approximately 12:30am. The RIC had requested assistance after the killing of two of their own, so the thirty Black and Tans arrived. The Tans were seeking known associates of Sinn Féin, so they went to the houses in which these men lived, but some escaped through the back of their houses. Some men ran around half dressed 'Up the Arch' as it is known locally, or Market Hill Lane. As the Black and Tans continued, they began to drink and started looting. They got more and more drunk and began to set fire to houses in the town. Houses which had been previously raided became targets for the Tans. In total fourteen houses were burned to the ground.

A group of men were outside the town and 'heard the sound of gunfire and saw the sky redden with the blaze of burning houses' (Bureau of Military History). Alex McDonnell's hotel on Main Street was one of the first buildings to be reduced to ashes. But that wasn't the only thing Mr. McDonnell lost on that horrific night, he also lost his son.



(Fig. 5)

Four or five Black and Tans came around Eddie King's Corner (now known as E.J. King's) and onto Main Street, at about 5:15 am. According to a military enquiry held on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March, at Eglington Street Police Station, John J. McDonnell came out of a house, just left of Main Street, and he was spotted by the group of Black and Tans when they came around Eddie King's Corner. They

ordered him to stop but he ran down the street. Again they told him to stop but he kept running. Two Constables tried to shoot him but they missed, and John. J continued to run. He ran towards his father's hotel, which was now just smouldering ashes. Six Black and Tans and a police sergeant who were in the archway, heard shouts and saw him as he crossed the road. They fired at him and he fell to the ground. They had shot him in the back of the head.

Several hours later, a passing doctor found his blood covered body lying on the ground outside Michael Ward's shop. The doctor examined him and removed his body. In the afternoon John J.'s body was brought to the church and on Friday he was buried in Ardbear, just outside the town. This man was just home from fighting in the war. He was an innocent man shot on his own streets after surviving the Great War.

Monsignor Mc Alpine was awoken at around 6 am from knocking on his door. He was told, 'For God's sake Canon, come down – the town is ablaze. Later Canon McAlpine stated, 'I went down to see if I could save anything of poor Clifden. The flames were then far advanced. Willie Clancy's was burning. Alex McDonnell's hotel was reduced to ashes. Crown forces were up and down the street; no one else dared to venture abroad. I went round the square and found that Mr. John M. Lyden's and Mr. Bartley King's were burning and the forces were engaged in setting fire to Mr. M.A. Manning's public house and Mrs. Bartley's restaurant.' (*Connacht Tribune*, October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1921.)

The Black and Tans did at some point that night, go to the Whelan's house but they didn't find anything. Thomas' nephew Tommy believes they may have shot some geese.

The locals of Clifden stayed away from the town until daybreak, but the horrors didn't end. Peter Clancy, who was minding his brother's shop, situated on Main

Street, was approached by Tans at around 8 am. When they took him out to the yard, he was shot in the head and neck. He survived, but was believed to have trouble speaking and eating afterwards. In court, Dr. O'Malley stated, 'one bullet had passed through the left tonsil and out the right side; another tunnelled through the lower jaw and clipped a bit of the tongue on its way out the opposite side. The third passed through the mouth from side to side, chipping the teeth in its passage.' (*Connacht Tribune*, October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1921.)

## Results of these acts:

The town of Clifden had never before witnessed acts like these on its streets. The people of Clifden were very upset and traumatized after what they had witnessed. They were innocent civilians that suffered afterwards. Most people got compensation for the damages and rebuilt their homes and businesses, but traumatic events like these are never forgotten and follow you until the end.

To my knowledge, there were no main arrests after the Burning. Events like these were happening all over the country, so there was no point, in the eyes of the British, to have court cases for acts like this. The law at the time was not effective at prosecuting British forces.

Mr. John M. Lyden's grocery, bakery and bar .. .. .	£10,250
The house next door owned by Misses King, in which Mr. Bertie King lives .. .. .	£2,500
Mr. Alec McDonnell's Hotel .. .. .	£6,000
Two houses in Market Hill belonging to Mr. Alec Higgins, in which his two sisters, the Misses Higgins, school teachers lived .. .. .	£800
Miss Higgins lost .. .. .	£200
William A. Clancy's licensed house and premises with the stable adjoining. A horse and two cows were burned to death in this fire .. .. .	£10,000
Patrick Clancy, his brother, front portion of shop damaged and goods taken .. .. .	£500
Peter Clancy shot and wounded in the back yard of Patrick Clancy's House .. .. .	£3,000
Mrs. Bartley's restaurant and the house next door .. .. .	£2,000
Patrick K. Joyce, butcher, house and furniture .. .. .	£2,500
Mrs. M. T. Manning, licensed premises, The Archway .. .. .	£10,250
Bartley King, Draper .. .. .	£7,000
Peter Clancy's licensed premises and grocery, shop damaged, and goods destroyed .. .. .	£300
Jas. Guilfoyle, a private house about half a mile west of the town .. .. .	£1,200
Mrs. Matthew Joyce, bootmakers, half a mile outside the town .. .. .	£1,000
Tom Senior, weaver, a small corrugated iron roofed house outside the town .. .. .	£300
John Hchir .. .. .	£650
Gerald Stanley .. .. .	£650
Patrick King .. .. .	£110
Mrs. Reynolds and reps. of Const. Sweeney about .. .. .	£7,000

*Conn. Trib. March 26 1921.*

(Fig.6)

## How these acts affected the town of

### Clifden:

The trauma of these events will always stay with the people of Clifden. RIC men often intimidated the town. It was acts, including the ones I have described that changed the view of many people in the town. During 1916, Clifden wanted Home Rule and was in favour of the IPP. Further down the line with these acts, the people of Clifden turned against all of that. Now they wanted a Free Independent State, and the British out.

Many thought the end of blood-shed in Clifden was when the Anglo Irish Treaty came into place, giving Ireland an independent Free State, but little did they know that worse was to come when the Civil War hit. Clifden changed from being in the hands of the Republicans to the Free State, back to Republicans and back to Free State again many times, which caused great unrest.

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I have said it many times in my project, and I still firmly believe that Thomas Whelan was an innocent young man, only 22 years of age, killed for a murder he did not commit and the results of these actions are still felt in Clifden today.

-In Memory of Thomas Whelan

By Grace King.

# Bibliography:

## Books:

*'Beyond the Twelve Bens, A History of Clifden and District 1860-1923'* by Villiers-Tuthill, Kathleen.

## Online Resources:

1. [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0707.pdf#page=42](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0707.pdf#page=42)
2. [http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/Michael\\_Collins](http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/Michael_Collins)
3. <http://www.glasnevintrust.ie/>
4. <http://www.connemaragaa.com/> politics 1013 (audio clip of Thomas' nephew)

## Newspapers

Irish independent

Connacht tribune

## Interviews

Interview with Kathleen Villiers-Tuthill on the 27<sup>th</sup> March, 2016.

## Images

1,2,3,5, and 6 with kind permission of Kathleen Villiers-Tuthill.