

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**Robert Byrne, Republican Trade Unionist**

*"Mr R Byrne of Limerick Post Office, when viewing the decorations in St. Ita's Hall, is alleged to have said that the flags would have to come down as no one would dance under the Union Jack...."*

**- Police report on alleged disloyalty of Postal officials in the City of Limerick, January 1917**

Robert Byrne was shot in his bed in Limerick Workhouse Hospital in the afternoon of Sunday April 6, 1919 in a struggle with members of the Royal Irish Constabulary. The shooting took place during an Attempted rescue of Byrne by members of the IRA, and within a few hours, he had bled to death from his wounds.

Twenty eight years old Robert Byrne lived with his mother and father at Town Wall Cottage in Limerick. Byrne was a cousin of the famous Lord Mayor of Dublin and former National Party MP, Alfie Byrne, and his father was a Dublin man from the North Strand. His mother was from Limerick.

Town Wall was an old, historic part of Limerick nestling below the famous walls that had witnessed the Williamite sieges of 1690 and 1691. It was reputed to be the place where the women of Limerick had marshalled to repel the Orange besiegers. The area had a strong, nationalist tradition which influenced Byrne's outlook and for a number of years he had been active in the Sinn Féin movement.

Robert Byrne was employed as a telegraphist in the General Post Office in Limerick. As far back as 1916, his name had been included in a list of Post Office officials who had "come under the notice of the Police by reason of their connection with the Irish Volunteer or Sinn Féin movements". The list shows an entry as follows: "Byrne, Clerk, Limerick, Reported to be Sinn Féiner - No action taken".

In January 1917, Byrne came under closer scrutiny from the Police Crime Branch (Special) in an investigation of "alleged disloyalty of Postal officials" in Limerick. Sinn Féin in Limerick often hired Saint Ita's hall for Sunday night dances. The drapers' assistants employed by Todds had arranged to hold a dance in the same hall on a Wednesday night and had decorated the hall in preparation. Among the decorations used were the flags of the Wartime Allies, including the Union Jack.

Limerick Postal officials had booked the same hall for a dance on the Saturday prior to the Sinn Féin event. On the morning of the Postal dance, "Mr R. Byrne of the Limerick Post Office" when viewing the decorations, was alleged to have said the flags would have to come down as no one would dance under the Union Jack.

On another occasion during that day, a police report noted that Byrne had said the postal officials were afraid to leave up the flags fearing the Sinn Féiners would interfere with them at their regular Sunday night dance

*'Forgotten Revolution - The Limerick Soviet 1919' by Liam Cahill*

*Special on-line edition 2003 © Liam Cahill*

Because of the postal clerks' objections, the drapers' assistants took down all the decorations. But the episode meant only a handful of postal officials attended their Saturday night dance, perhaps fearing that association with the event might damage their careers.

Robert Byrne's star continued to rise in the Republican firmament. Just before Christmas 1918, he was elected Adjutant of the Second Battalion, Limerick Brigade of the IRA. But the tolerance of the authorities had reached its limits. In January 1919, Byrne was dismissed from the Post Office for attending the funeral of a Limerick Volunteer named John Daly.<sup>(4)</sup> In a report headed "The Hidden Hand in the GPO", the "Bottom Dog" grimly noted the "esteemed and respected" Byrne's dismissal. It warned that he would have the support of Post Office Clerks' Association and the trade union movement generally.

Within days of losing his job, his mother's house was raided for arms. On January 13, 1919 Byrne was arrested by the RIC and charged with possession of a revolver and ammunition. According to some accounts, Byrne's colleagues believed these items had been planted on him.

Byrne was court-martialled and sentenced to twelve months imprisonment with hard labour for being in possession of a revolver and ammunition. The official courts-martial records show such a sentence passed on "Robert T Byrnes" of Limerick on either February 2 or 4 - one date has been typed on top of the other and it is therefore difficult to say which is the intended date.

Byrne quickly asserted himself as leader of the Republican prisoners in Limerick Jail but he found himself in a prison system where solitary confinement and cruelty were the order of the day, and the prisoners' response was the terrible double-edged sword of the hunger strike.

Early in January, "The Irish Independent" had reported a meeting held at the O'Connell Monument in Limerick to protest at the treatment of political prisoners in the local Prison. <sup>(7)</sup> The Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr Denis Hallinan, described the prisoners' treatment as "a gross breach of the promise made by the Government in Ireland on the death of Thomas Ashe". <sup>(8)</sup> Ashe died on September 25 1917 as a result of forcible feeding in Mountjoy Prison, in Dublin, during a hunger strike. The Limerick meeting was reported to be "of large dimensions, although called at an hour's notice". <sup>(9)</sup> Significantly, in view of later events, the speakers included John Cronin, President of Limerick United Trades and Labour Council.

Then, as in later years, the demand of Republican prisoners was to be treated as political prisoners, establishing their own military discipline and not subject to the ordinary prison routine.

Finding that peaceful methods were of no avail in advancing their demands, the Republican prisoners resorted to other methods. Within days of his imprisonment, as senior officer, Robert Byrne started a campaign of disobedience. The prison authorities sent for RIC reinforcements. The prisoners were beaten, their boots and clothing removed. They were handcuffed, some were kept in solitary confinement and given only bread and water.

*'Forgotten Revolution - The Limerick Soviet 1919' by Liam Cahill*

*Special on-line edition 2003 © Liam Cahill*

*'Forgotten Revolution - The Limerick Soviet 1919' by Liam Cahill*

*Special on-line edition 2003 © Liam Cahill*

Led by Byrne, the prisoners rioted, wrecking cells and smashing fittings. Again, they were overpowered by the sheer force of RIC reinforcements. The Official Press Censor prevented the "Irish Independent" from reporting the disturbance. Byrne resorted to the final weapon - a hunger strike.

The official Prison Board records for this period were removed from Dublin Castle when the British administration finally withdrew in 1922, so it is difficult to put an exact date on the commencement of Byrne's hunger strike. However, contemporary newspaper reports suggest it was in the third week of February.

The events in Limerick Prison were reported to the office of the Chief Secretary for Ireland on a daily basis. The files there recorded the commencement of Byrne's hunger strike and a discussion of the granting of what was termed amelioration to him. There was a general report on the "disorderly conduct" of prisoners and a report on damage to prison property by Robert J Byrne and James Kennedy. One interesting document was entitled "Limerick: Damage to prison property and list of mutinous DORA prisoners". The Castle records note that this file was transferred to the Irish Free State Department of Justice on May 5, 1925, when that fledgling state presumably faced similar problems in its prisons.

Although the authorities did not attempt forcible feeding of Robert Byrne, forcible feeding of prisoners was a major issue in Limerick during February 1919. On February 8, A F Falkiner, Governor of Limerick Prison, sent Max Green, the Chairman of the General Prisons Board, a copy of what he termed a "placard" posted in Limerick that evening. (12) The leaflet referred to "the horrible and revolting system of forcible feeding" and accused two Limerick doctors of "doing (their) dirty work !".

The doctors were named as McGrath and Irwin. Dr P J Irwin was stated, in the leaflet, to be Resident Medical Officer at the Limerick District Asylum "at a salary of close on one thousand pounds per annum." The leaflet alleged Irwin was ready to put the life of a fellow-countryman in danger for the sake of an additional three guineas a week. Also on the night of February 8<sup>th</sup>, a dozen similar leaflets were found in the letter box at Limerick Post Office.

On February 13<sup>th</sup>, District Inspector Craig of the RIC submitted a report on the leafletting incidents to the force's Inspector General. Both doctors were stated to be popular and not in any danger. Dr M S McGrath FRCS had one of the city dispensaries, and was Medical Officer of Health as well as being Prison Medical Officer. During 1917 and 1918, the doctor did a good deal to highlight Limerick's appalling slum housing in a series of three articles he wrote for the "Bottom Dog". Inspector Craig noted that McGrath's private practice was not large and, that for the present, he was not likely to suffer professional injury. "But", the District Inspector remarked, "if he has to forcibly feed sinn Féin (sic) prisoners in the future it is very probable that he will become unpopular."

On the same day, Limerick Asylum Board met to consider the actions of Dr Irwin, their Resident Medical Officer. Dr Irwin denied he had left

*'Forgotten Revolution - The Limerick Soviet 1919' by Liam Cahill*

*Special on-line edition 2003 © Liam Cahill*

*'Forgotten Revolution - The Limerick Soviet 1919' by Liam Cahill*

*Special on-line edition 2003 © Liam Cahill*

the asylum to forcibly feed prisoners for an additional three guineas a week. He claimed he had been acting on foot of the general rules for the management of the asylum and in accordance with the practice of his predecessor over fifteen years. The Asylum Board adopted a resolution expressing considerable indignation at Irwin's action, and noting that he had promised he would refuse to continue assisting in forcible feeding.

Dr Irwin's withdrawal was reported to the General Prisons Board on February 14 by Dr McGrath in his capacity as Medical Officer of Limerick Prison. Dr McGrath requested that arrangements be made to get a Consultant from somewhere else, with recognised experience, to assist in any further recourse to forcible feeding. His view was that there were no members of the medical profession in Limerick on whom he could count to consult with him if the question arose again.

Dublin Castle studied the General Rules and Regulations for the Management of the Limerick District Asylum, drawn up in 1912, to see if the Asylum Resident Medical Superintendent could be forced to assist the Prison Doctor. Rule Five stated:

"The Resident Medical Superintendent shall superintend and regulate the whole establishment....He shall devote the whole of his time to his office....He shall, however, be permitted to undertake the following engagements - visiting any person at the request of the Lord Lieutenant, the Lord Chancellor, the General Prisons Board, the Inspectors of Lunatics, or one of them, examining into such person's mental state, reporting, and, if necessary, giving evidence thereon."

The Castle concluded, correctly, that there was nothing in this rule to authorise Dr Irwin's assistance at forcible feeding in the prison.

Since Dr Irwin's withdrawal almost coincided with the start of Robert Byrne's hunger strike, that may explain why the prison authorities did not try to forcibly feed Byrne. The strain of forcible feeding, and its attendant unpopularity obviously took its toll of Dr McGrath. In 1919, he applied for a salary increase and later in the same year he resigned as Medical Officer of Limerick Prison.

The treatment of the prisoners did not go without local protest. The Mayor and Corporation discussed the situation and wrote to the Castle authorities protesting at the sentences and treatment of Byrne and a prisoner named Moran. Once again the Press Censor, deleted the major portion of the "Independent's" report. This told how the prisoners were handcuffed and lashed with ropes in their cells, deprived of their food, papers and tobacco and how the police had assaulted the prisoners. A public meeting was also held to protest against the treatment of the prisoners.

Understandably, since Robert Byrne was a delegate representing the Post Office clerks, Limerick Trades Council joined in the protests. At a meeting on February 14 - when pressure on the two doctors was at its height - the Council adopted a resolution and later distributed it throughout the city in leaflet form under the heading "The Jail Infamy in Limerick". This leaflet was duly noted in the files of Dublin

*'Forgotten Revolution - The Limerick Soviet 1919' by Liam Cahill*

*Special on-line edition 2003 © Liam Cahill*

*'Forgotten Revolution - The Limerick Soviet 1919' by Liam Cahill*

*Special on-line edition 2003 © Liam Cahill*

Castle as a "Sinn Féin" leaflet.

The Trades Council resolution read:

"That we the members of Limerick Trades and Labour Council, assembled in conference, protest most emphatically against the treatment meted out to the political prisoners at present confined in Limerick County Jail, and view with grave alarm the inactivity of the Visiting Justices and Medical Officer. Furthermore, we call on the public representatives to do their duty to their fellow-countrymen and take the necessary steps to have the prisoners receive what they are justly entitled to, namely political treatment; that copies of this resolution be submitted to the local Press, Visiting Justices and Medical Officer."

The Trades Council leaflet contrasted the treatment of the Republican prisoners with that of a man convicted of the manslaughter of a girl "in circumstances of the most revolting brutality". He had been sentenced by a judge "lenient to his ilk" to serve twelve months in the first division of the prison. The killer was not required to work, according to the leaflet, and he was supplied with every comfort - a cot, books, newspapers, slippers, glass, writing materials. "In fact", the leaflet claimed, he had "everything he could procure in a first-class hotel."

In an emotional appeal, the Council suggested that men "who have never committed a crime" believed they were entitled at least to the treatment the criminal was getting. It said that one of the prisoners - Henry Meany - was in a bad state of health, yet was manacled as well as handcuffed. Meany was subsequently removed to Mountjoy Prison in Dublin in a very critical condition.

Hunger strikes, forcible feeding and protests were not confined to Limerick. By April 1919, prisoners in Dublin, Belfast and Cork had spent as many as fourteen weeks in solitary confinement in disputes over their treatment as political prisoners.

After three weeks of his hunger strike, the prison authorities became worried about Byrne's condition. Between March 6 and 8 Byrne became confined to bed in the Prison hospital. On March 12, he was removed to Number One ward of Limerick Workhouse, or the Union Infirmary as it was also called. This ward was on the second floor, near the Infirmary gates.

The Limerick IRA sensed an opportunity to boost morale and embarrass the authorities by rescuing Byrne from the less secure confines of the Workhouse. Commandant Peadar Dunne called a battalion council meeting in Hogan's, next door to Matt Boland's shop in Gerald Griffin Street. A plan was agreed, to be executed on Sunday, April 6.

Twenty four IRA men were to enter the ward under the guise of visitors and a covering party of fifteen would be on duty in the corridors and grounds. According to one account, only Michael "Batty" Stack, Section Leader of E Company would be armed, though a not necessarily fully reliable contemporary report suggests two members of the rescue party were armed. On the day, there was a hitch in the transport arrangements. The Battalion driver had to leave Limerick City urgently

*'Forgotten Revolution - The Limerick Soviet 1919' by Liam Cahill*

*Special on-line edition 2003 © Liam Cahill*

*'Forgotten Revolution - The Limerick Soviet 1919' by Liam Cahill*

*Special on-line edition 2003 © Liam Cahill*

to help Dan Breen and Sean Hogan - still wanted for their part in the January killing of RIC members at Soloheadbeg - escape through a British military cordon. Instead, a mourning coach was got from a local undertaker, with a nurse inside ready with clothes and a disguise for Byrne.

The RIC had general orders to shoot prisoners in circumstances where a rescue was being attempted. That Sunday afternoon, Robert Byrne was being closely guarded by Sergeant J F Goulden or Golden of Ballyneety, County Limerick, Constable J Tierney of Kiltteely, Constable J Fitzpatrick of Clarina, Constable Martin O'Brien who was attached to Caherconlish Station, Constable T Spillane of Askeaton Station and Warder John Mahoney or Mahony, Rocksborough Road, who was on the staff of Limerick Jail.

As the hands of the clock moved nearer to three, the pitch of conversation rose as visitors tried to cram into the remaining minutes the things that had been left unsaid during the rest of the visiting time. IRA man Paddy Dawson, checked his watch, and blew a shrill whistle in a prearranged signal

All the accounts of what happened next agree it was a short, decisive affray. According to the warder, two men presented revolvers and ordered "Hands Up !". Several revolver shots rang out and patients jumped beneath their beds in terror as panic-stricken visitors scattered. People out for a Sunday afternoon stroll turned back in fright at the sound of gunfire. Constable Martin O'Brien was already firing.

As soon as the whistle was blown, warder Mahony, Constable Spillane and another policeman ran to the bed and grabbed Byrne as he tried to rise. Constable Spillane had his revolver out, and as Robert Byrne tried to heave himself out of bed, the burly policeman hurled himself bodily on top of him. Sometime during this confused struggle, a bullet entered the body of Robert Byrne, on the left hand side, between the 6th and 7th ribs. From a range of four feet, Batty Stack shattered Spillane's spine with a bullet from a .38 revolver. A second shot from Stack, and the eighteen stone Constable O'Brien collapsed to the floor in an ungainly heap.

Clad only in his night-shirt and an overcoat, Byrne staggered down the stairs, supported by two comrades. By mistake, the coach driver had gone round to the mortuary at the back of the hospital. Instead, Byrne and his companions were forced on to the public road. They had gone only three hundred yards, towards Hassett's Cross, when they stopped a pony and trap driven by John Ryan of Knockalisheen, County Clare, and his daughter Nancy. They brought the wounded IRA man to their labourer's cottage, near Meelick, in County Clare. There, at half past eight on Sunday, April 6 Robert Byrne died.

Earlier, in the Workhouse, Constable Martin O'Brien had died too. At his request, a clergyman was sent for and the Chaplain, Canon O'Driscoll, administered the Last Rites of the Catholic Church to the dying man. Constable Spillane's wound, close to his spine, was also serious but the other policemen and the warder sustained only minor injuries, probably caused by being hit by a truncheon which was later found in the ward. There were bullet marks on the walls and the statue

*'Forgotten Revolution - The Limerick Soviet 1919' by Liam Cahill*

*Special on-line edition 2003 © Liam Cahill*

*'Forgotten Revolution - The Limerick Soviet 1919' by Liam Cahill*

*Special on-line edition 2003 © Liam Cahill*

of the Infant of Prague on a little altar had been damaged by a ricochet.

Constable O'Brien was a married man, with one child. One report gives his age as 50, but another states he was 35, with twelve years service in the Constabulary. O'Brien was stationed in Caherconlish, in County Limerick, and he had been on temporary duty in the city for only three weeks. He was buried in his native Birr, County Offaly. There was a large attendance at the funeral, including senior Catholic clergy, and there were fifty cars in the cortege. In a sign that bitterness had not yet run too deep, some members of Sinn Féin attended the funeral.

The Lord Lieutenant, Lord French, sent his condolences to Mrs O'Brien, as did the Inspector-General of the RIC. Mrs O'Brien demanded two thousand pounds in compensation for the death of her husband. Dublin Castle records later show a grant made to the Constable's mother, an application by his widow to be made Post Mistress of Caherconlish, in County Limerick, and the grant to her of a pension of two pounds a week. Constable Spillane, son of an RIC Sergeant from Loughrea in County Galway, was also awarded a pension. He was lucky to have survived. He was removed to Dublin for treatment where surgeons discovered the bullet lodged in his spine and removed it.

The area around the house in Meelick, where Robert Byrne died, was placed under military control and there was much police and military activity in Counties Clare and Limerick. One of the few documents of the time still extant in Dublin Castle is a telegram from County Inspector Yates, of the RIC, reporting the finding of Byrne's body. (26) The telegram was dispatched at 1.53 pm. and received in the Chief Secretary's office at 3.17 pm., on Monday April 7. It said the body had just been discovered at the house of John Ryan of Knockalisheen, Ardnacrusa sub-District, County Clare. Death had apparently been caused by a bullet wound in the stomach.

According to the telegram, the owner of the house, John Ryan, was arrested, along with others found there: Arthur Johnson, Parnell Street, Limerick, John Hurley of Town Wall Cottage (a cousin of the deceased), the prisoner's mother, Mrs Byrne, Thomas Crowe of Sarsfield Street and Patrick Brady of Lower Gerald Griffin Street. Brady, it later emerged, had been sent from an undertakers to measure the deceased for his coffin. Arthur Johnson had been Byrne's predecessor as Adjutant and was now Battalion Engineer in the IRA; Hurley later became Quarter Master of the mid-Limerick Brigade of the IRA.

Robert Byrne had the attentions of one, and possibly a second doctor and a priest before he died. His body lay on a bed in an upper storey of Ryan's house and on the naked breast, close to the heart, was a hole the size of a halfpenny. The bullet had passed through his lungs, causing a fatal haemorrhage. Near the bed was a bloodstained Volunteer's overcoat. Mrs Ryan said that the men who had brought Byrne to the house were complete strangers to her, but they had asked her, in the name of God, to take him in.

The authorities kept a close watch on the Meelick cottage. It was surrounded by detachments of police and the Scottish Horse regiment. On her way there, the vehicle in which Mrs Byrne travelled had been preceded and followed by military lorries. Apart from promptly

*'Forgotten Revolution - The Limerick Soviet 1919' by Liam Cahill*

*Special on-line edition 2003 © Liam Cahill*

arresting her when she arrived, four other women were also arrested, as were John Ryan's wife, his servant boy and servant girl. In the succeeding weeks, those who had been arrested were released.

The General Meeting of Limerick Trades Council held on the Friday after Byrne's death dealt only with some matters of special importance. As a mark of respect to their late fellow-member, the President John Cronin suggested that they adjourn after the minutes had been read. He said it was his sad duty to propose this resolution: "That a vote of condolence be sent to Mrs Byrne on the death of her son, who for the cause of self-determination as all Irishmen are entitled to, was murdered by the minions of English Tyranny here in our midst." But while condoling with Mrs Byrne, Cronin said he must also congratulate her in having reared a son of such heroic disposition, whose name would be handed down in generations to come as an example of what an Irishman should be.

Mrs Byrne's letter in reply is preserved in the minute book of the Council: "... Thank God that our dear son and brother died a free man fighting for his country's cause. I pray the Almighty that his blood has not been shed in vain and that our dear Motherland will soon shake off the shackles of the Foreigner and take her righteous place among the Nations of the Earth...."

The letter's style is reminiscent of similar letters written, for example, by the executed leaders of the 1916 Rising and their families. In later years, however, local people believed Mrs Byrne missed her son deeply and regretted his death to the point of bitterness.

Mrs Byrne's treatment at Meelick and the arrest of some of the prisoner's cousins led to protests later at a meeting of the Limerick Infirmary Guardians. There were incidents around William Street police station and reports of a baton charge in the city. Thus, the first week of April 1919 ended in Limerick with stirring events and passions aroused.

But there was more to come, as people learned the details of Byrne's shooting and death and Limerick prepared to mourn a dead hero. The fuse had been lit and the flame had begun its inexorable approach to the powder keg.