

Breaking Stones for the County Council

William Goodwin

The Man Who Broke His Leg at the Stacumney Ambush, Celbridge
2 July 1921.

Seamus A. Cummins

The attempt to ambush a troop train carrying British soldiers on their return to their base in the Curragh following their duties at the State Opening of the Northern Ireland Parliament under the provisions of the *Government of Ireland Act (1920)* has been described in some detail by a number of sources (1). These in turn relied in part on Irish Military Archives, Dublin, particularly the Bureau of Military Witness Statements and the Military Service Pensions Collection.

Central to all accounts was the successful extrication and withdrawal of the IRA ambush column and its auxiliaries from a most dangerous situation following their discovery by a British army patrol. “... *A short fight ensued but our men extricated themselves without suffering any casualties...*” (2).

Matthew Barry who took part in the ambush recorded “...*One man had broken his leg but was put up by some friends and looked after...*” (3).

David Hall who was a participant like Barry give more detail “...*One man belonging to our column broke his leg when jumping a bank. He rolled himself into a ditch and concealed himself in the underground (sic)..*” (4).

The leader of the Leixlip contingent at Stacumney, Patrick Mullaney, who played a crucial role in extricating the IRA from probable annihilation on the 2 July 1921 relates how word was sent to him at Leixlip that a man was lying injured in a ditch near Stacumney. Mullaney arranged for his rescue and treatment (5).

Thereafter, the anonymous individual disappears from the Stacumney narrative.

His name was William Goodwin of Baltrasna, Drumree, Co. Meath. He was born in 1891 and aged 20 when injured at Stacumney. He was by trade an agricultural labourer. He was a member of the 1 Batt. “C” Coy. (Kilcloon), 1 Meath Brigade, I Eastern Division, IRA.

He had a brother, Thomas, a member of the same Kilcloon Company and also an agricultural labourer, but “...*not a column man...*” (6).

At Stacumney William Goodwin was part of the detachment under the command of Patrick Clinton, Adjutant of the 1 Eastern Division. He was armed with a rifle and from early morning until around 2pm when the ambush plan disintegrated he was in the yard of Wardell's farm, the command centre of the IRA Column. “...*I was in a house, Wardell's was the name of the house. There were 7 or 8 or ten of us in that house...*” (8).

The troop trains were due to reach the ambush site at around 1pm. By that time all was ready, the explosives were primed and the engineers and imploders in

place. Clinton and his men were due to take up positions near the railway adjacent to the Wardell farm buildings when the ambush was surprised by a military patrol in lorries who were monitoring the progress and safety of the troop trains (9).

According to Goodwin this occurred when “...*We were going up to the road to take up position when fire was opened up on us...in the yard just going up the lane...The house was down next the rly (sic) and we were just going up to the position at the top of the road...*”(10).

Clinton and his men including Goodwin were now caught under fire in the open yard and took what cover they could. By this stage the intended target, the largest troop train had stopped and troops were disembarking and preparing to counter attack. Furthermore a spotter aeroplane escorting the troop train had begun to mark out and signal the IRA positions. Eventually the IRA Commander, Seamus Finn, ordered a withdrawal and the IRA disengaged, breaking off and withdrawing in various directions. Some, including Clinton's group which included Goodwin headed directly across the railway line opposite the farm yard into open country and circling back to eventually reach Dunboyne (11). Witness Statements while critical in hindsight of the overall planning of the ambush were agreed that the withdrawal was successful, with some praising the Leixlip commander, Patrick Mullaney for his efforts in that regard.

Diarmuid Ferriter makes the point cogently that veterans who gave statements to the Bureau of Military History in the 1940s and 1950s did so in the knowledge that their evidence would someday be made public and must be evaluated in that context. Those who made pension applications such as William Goodwin made no such presumption and was forthright in his evidence. His purpose was to relieve the distress arising from his injury, not to address posterity, validating Ferriter's comment that “...*There is an intense intimacy to many of the files that humanise the conflict...*”(12).

From the evidence presented by Goodwin in his pension application, when the order was given to withdraw, the Clinton group of which he was part, scattered and made for the railway line in order to cross it and escape, leaving the disembarking troops and military patrol unsuspected. This was successful and the group minus Goodwin, made its way successfully to Divisional headquarters at Dunboyne (13).

As the group scattered and rushed the ditch lining the railway Goodwin fell and as it later transpired, broke his ankle leaving him essentially immobile. He appears to have made it across the railway line and burrowed himself under

some briar bushes. According to Goodwin, his commanding officer, Patrick Clinton told him to do the best he could for himself and then left him. Goodwin's replies to questioning at the pension application hearing were stark.

Q. "Did Clinton help you into the briars?"

A. "No. I was just talking to him and he went away with the rest of the crowd. I was beside the ditch"

Q. "Was this the fellow in the Civic Guards?" (Patrick Clinton was later a Chief Superintendent in An Garda Siochana)

A. "I don't know. I never saw him since or before" (14).

After being left behind Goodwin remained hidden in the briars awaiting nightfall. Being the 2 July he had a long wait but he avoided capture as the British were focussed on Wardell's farm and yard as the IRA command centre, disconnecting the explosive charges, searching the farm yard, all on the opposite side to Goodwin's position. *"...The British Military searched the area thoroughly but did not find him.."* (15).

When it became dark Goodwin crawled across the railway line again in the direction of Wardells *"I saw a cottage in the distance about another field away from me. I could go no further and I shouted and three girls came to my assistance...They had a crowd of men in a few minutes..."* (16).

Who these girls are is a matter of conjecture. They may have included some of the Wardells who had been confined by the IRA from early morning of 2 July. David Hall reports that *"Mr. Wardell's herd found him the following day and loaded him on to his donkey cart and took him to his own house... the man's rifle was lost and I believe the military picked it up "* (17).

This is the only mention of a lost rifle and it may have been the *"I rifle"* listed by the British as being captured at Stacumney (18), a testament as to how carefully the IRA held on to or concealed their weapons which they recovered some days later (19).

The rescue and recovery of Goodwin can be pieced together by a number of sources. The summary of his evidence given in the course of his pension application relates, *"...Three girls came to his assistance and then a number of men. Having given him some food they were apparently so scared that they left him out in a field all night by himself, none was found to give him the shelter of a house. The following day two men and two girls came in a pony and trap and took him to a farmer's house where he got medical attention, after which he was taken home. He was invalided then until Feb '22 when he went into Vincent's Hospital in Dublin for an operation..."*(20).

In his interview account Goodwin is recorded as less critical, stating “...*I was out all night that night (2 July 1921). They were afraid to bring me into a house in case of a raid...They brought me tea and then in the morning – I think it was Sunday morning...two men and two girls came in a pony and trap...one of them was this O'Mally, he was a schoolmaster...They brought me to to some big farmers place and got a doctor....I got home that night. The doctor tied up my leg and I was brought home to my own place – my father and mothers place..*”(21).

From this it can be inferred that leaving Goodwin outside on a Summer's night was as much to protect him from capture as well as protect others in case of a raid. The “*O'Malley he was a schoolmaster*” is the best Goodwin can remember of (Patrick) Mullaney NT, who taught in Leixlip Boys National School.

Mullaney references the rescue of Goodwin in his account of the activity of the 1 Meath Brigade, 1 Eastern Division 1918 – 1923 which he wrote in 1941 for the Military Service Pensions Board.

For the 3 July 1921 under the heading “*Stacumney, Removing Injured Man,*” he records “... *Word had reached Leixlip that a man was lying injured in a ditch near Stacumney. A horse and cart was provided and driven by ladies mentioned went as instructed to neighbourhood. In the meantime the man was taken from his place in ditch and later to a house. Here the doctor attended him and he was driven out of the area in a trap...*”

The two women are named as Miss E. Dillon and Miss Devany. The doctor attending is named as Dr. D. Hamson of Lucan. Others named as involved in the rescue of Goodwin are Mullaney himself, Diarmuid O'Neill, E. Malone, Jas. Farrell and P. Kyne (22).

There is an application on file in the Military Service Pension Collection of an application for a pension from a Nellie Dillon of Main St. Leixlip. (Mullaney's reference to an E. Dillon, may be an echo of Nellie after twenty years).

In her application she listed her main contribution 1917 – 1921 as a dispatch courier bringing dispatches and replies from Kildare to Dublin. She also mentions Stacumney, “...*Post Stacumney attended an injured party left behind following withdrawal and brought him to needed attention...*” and also, “...*During the period immediately prior to the Truce 11 July 1921 my services were always at the disposal of the Volunteers and on one occasion I assisted in having a man who was injured removed to a place of safety with others in a pony and trap, this was on 3 July 1921 Sunday after the Stacumney Ambush...*”(23).

Dillon was denied a pension, not uncommon for women whose activities were “...only sometimes taken into account and many had to endure a belittling of their efforts...” (24).

Goodwin's initial injury of a broken ankle had been exacerbated to the point of life changing as a result of his crawling across fields for assistance and having to remain concealed for the best part of two days. This was apparent to David Hall who seems to have been aware of the serious nature of the injuries as they had now developed. Hall was Goodwin's Brigade Commanding Officer and as such sought to have Goodwin cared for by approaching the Divisional Commander Sean Boylan after Goodwin was returned to his parent's home.

“...I endeavoured to have Goodwin's case attended to immediately after the ambush but I could not get any sympathy from Boylan who refused to give me any assistance to have the unfortunate Goodwin attended to in a proper way so I was forced to have him treated locally by the local doctor...” (25).

Goodwin was of a family of agricultural labourers and the IRA was not devoid of social prejudice, “...there was still much tuppence halfpenny looking down on tuppence...”(26).

The capacity of a local doctor to treat the serious injury that had incapacitated Goodwin was limited. He was unable to support himself and his family being of limited means could do little to help. Hall was instrumental in approaching the local Board of Guardians, still functioning under the Poor Law Acts and obtaining for Goodwin £1 per week outdoor relief “...to sustain him through his sufferings. Goodwin was very badly treated by all concerned for it was not until 28 February 1922 I was able to have him admitted to St. Vincent's Hospital for treatment that meant many operations...”

Through the intervention of Hall, who clearly felt he was alone in exercising his duty of care to a subordinate injured on active service, the admission to hospital was at the intervention and expense of the Local Public Health Authority. He was to remain in hospital until 21 April 1922. But his injuries had been so far neglected that in the opinion of Hall “...he was discharged little better than when he went in and is permanently incapacitated since...” (27).

The impact of the injury on Goodwin's life can be gauged by a letter he wrote to the Military Pensions Board, from internal evidence, sometime after 1924. He claims he is effectively disabled due to his injury and cannot work as an agricultural labourer “... I am breaking stones at present for the County Council and that may be only a few days...” (28).

Casual work was to be his destiny for the rest of his life. By 1939 he is described in a Department of Defence memo on his Pension File as “Casual Worker.” By then he had been awarded a yearly Military Pension of £5-16-8 ,

plus a Disability pension of 10/6 per week. From the memo it seems his casual work was with Meath County Council. Following an intervention from the then Minister of defence, Frank Aiken, Goodwin was supplied with a Surgical Boot from 1935 following supporting medical reports that Goodwin was subject to recurrent pain as well as disability arising from the injury to his ankle on 2 July 1921 (29).

William Godwin died on 27 January 1968, aged 78, of cerebral thrombosis in Baltrasna County Meath. He is described on his death certificate as a widower and by trade a labourer (30).

He came to personify the recent conclusion of Professor Diarmuid Ferriter, “...*For most victims of the civil war, material compensation came dropping slowly and meanly, if at all...*” (31).

Postscript

After Stacumney the Black and Tans came calling. On 4 July 1921 The Goodwin family home was raided. William Goodwin was clearly not at home but his brother Thomas Goodwin was. While not “*a column man*”, he was a member of the Kilcloon company like his brother (*supra*), and was in possession of dispatches at the time. As the Tans arrived Thomas Goodwin ran out the back entrance to the home. He came under fire and by a bizarre coincidence suffered a compound fracture of one of his legs as he attempted to clear a ditch. He was captured but due to his injury was taken to Navan Hospital. He was luckier than his brother in that he received treatment soon after his injury and his injury was not as debilitating. He spent ten months in Navan Hospital ensuring there were no further consequences to his capture. In time he was awarded a wound pension and later a knee pad and boot lift to ease ongoing discomfort (32).

The raid on Goodwins may have been the result of intelligence work and may have prompted orders “...*for all active men in the area to stay away from their homes until after the Truce took effect...*” (33)

Notes

1. Cullen, Seamus. Attempted Ambush and Escape from Stacumney, 2 July 1921, in *The Irish Sword, Journal of the Military History Society of Ireland*, Vol. XXIX, No. 115, Summer 2013.
Cummins, Seamus. *Planes, Trains and the Postman's Bicycle, The Stacumney Ambush, Celbridge, Co. Kildare, 2 July 1921*. Kildare Co. Council and The Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts and Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. 2021.
2. *Irish Military Archives (MA), Bureau of Military History (BMH), Witness Statement (WS) 1715*, Sean Boylan, who was the commander of the 1 Eastern Division IRA, but did not attend at Stacumney.
3. *MA/BMH, WS 1064*, Seamus Finn. Finn was delegated by Boylan to take command at Stacumney.
4. *MA/BMH, WS 1539*, David Hall.
5. *MA/MSPC/A/57 (1)*, Activity Records, 1 Meath Brigade, 1 Eastern Division, 3 July 1921. Mullaney's crucial role in the withdrawal is affirmed by another participant Patrick Clinton in a corroborative statement in support of Mullaney's Pension Application, "...His personal courage throughout this action cannot be too highly referred to..." (*MA/MSPC/34 /REF/35313*).
6. *MA/MSPC/34/REF/43877*.
7. Cf. Cullen and Cummins, *op.cit.* for accounts of the various elements in the IRA Column.
8. *MA/MSPC/34REF/4378*.
9. Cullen, *op. cit.* Cummins, *op. cit.* p.17.
10. *MA/MSPC/34/REF/43878*.
11. Cummins.. *op. cit.* p.17ff.
12. Ferriter, Diarmuid. *Between Two Hells, The Irish Civil War*. London 2021, p.131.
13. Cummins, *op. cit.* p.22.
14. *MA/MSPC/34/REF.43878*. Patrick Joseph Clinton was born in 1893 and by 1921 was Adjutant of the 1 Eastern Division IRA, commanded by Sean Boylan. Following the Treaty he joined the National Army but resigned on 24 August 1922 to join the newly formed Garda Siochana. He was appointed Chief Superintendent in An Garda Siochana in 1924 (*MA/MSPC/24/C/142*). He retired in 1941 and died in 1952 aged 58. In his pension application he mentions only his participation in the "*Celbridge train attack*," with no further details given (*MA/MSPC24/SP/13263*).
15. *MA/BNH/WS 1539*, David Hall, a Brigade O/C, 1 Eastern Division. From internal evidence it appears that Hall had later knowledge of Goodwins' injury and tried to help him in later life. It is probable his knowledge came from Goodwin himself.

16. *MA/MSPC/REF/43878*. Also, *MA/BMH/WS/1395* James Crinnigan. Crinnigan was one of a detachment from Fingal under the command of Patrick Mooney, who took part in the ambush. In the course of their withdrawal they also crossed the railway but needed to cross the canal which was parallel to the railway. Curiously they also encountered some girls “...we observed some girls and they were calling to us. We approached them and they led us along to where there was a bridge over the canal which we crossed. They informed us that the British military had erected a road block across the road, a short distance away...”
17. *MA/BMH/WS/1539*, David Hall. Hall is the only witness who mentions Wardell's herd, information he may have got from Goodwin himself and the details are a mix of information that are clarified by others, Goodwin and Patrick Mullaney.
18. *Irish Times*, 4 July 1921, *Leinster Leader*, 9 July 1921, Cummins, *op. cit.* p.29.
19. Cummins, *op. cit.* p.28, p.32
20. *MA/MSPC/REF/43878*.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *MA/MSPC/A/57 (1)*.
23. *MA/MSPC/34/REF/7*.
24. Ferriter, *op. cit.* p.179. For an analysis of the difficulties experienced by women in obtaining recognition of pensionable service pp.175 – 187.
25. *MA/MSPC/IP/264*. Corroborative written evidence by Hall in support of Goodwin's application.
26. Ferriter, *op. cit.* p.13
27. *MA/MSPC/IP/264*.
28. *MA/MSPC/REF/43878*.
29. *MA/MSPC/2APB69*, Medical reports on Goodwin's disability
30. *General Registry Office, Dublin, Births, Marriages, Deaths*.
31. Ferriter, *op. cit.* p.129.
32. *MA/MSPC34/REF/43877*, *MA/MSPC/IP268*.
33. *MA/MSPC/A/57 (1)*.