

# Rail crash impacts on Michael Collins' election 32 years later

*Last year was the 120th anniversary of the 'Great Armagh Railway Disaster' and here Eric Villiers looks back at the tragedy and how, 32 years later, it impacted on the election of Michael Collins as MP for Armagh. The connection between Collins and the crash is recorded in the diaries of Joseph Holloway who spent over 50 years documenting Dublin's cultural, social and political events. The diaries entitled Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer are housed in the National Library of Ireland, Dublin.*

Revelations that connect Michael Collins; a world-renown Shakespearean scholar; the Armagh Rail Disaster; the Rev Ian Paisley and the Thompson sub-machine-gun have been found in a little known Dublin archive.

According to the archive Michael Collins' capture of his Armagh seat in the first northern parliament was helped by the last minute deployment of a prominent Belfast academic with Armagh connections.

Three days before polling closed on May 24, 1921 Collins, desperate to win the evenly divided 'city ward', despatched the Shakespearean scholar, Dr William Lawrence to campaign in Armagh.

At the time, with Eamon de Valera out of the country, Collins was effectively head of Sinn Fein and the IRA. It seems de Valera was not 'sold' on the idea of fighting the election and Collins knew he had to win at least 10 seats to avoid embarrassing the party.

Collins was also anxious about his own chances in County Armagh where he was up against three strong candidates - a nationalist and two unionists - and despatched Lawrence by train to Armagh on May 20. He seems to have chosen Lawrence because he was known in Armagh as an unsung hero of the rail crash 32 years earlier.

Collins would also have been well aware that Lawrence, a former pupil of Belfast Methodist College was a Protestant who had worked in Armagh for Kirker, Greer and Company. As a drink salesman in the years before the rail crash Lawrence had

come to know many of the victims and relatives.

In his diary for May 21, 1921 Holloway noted that Lawrence had travelled 'up to' Armagh for Sinn Fein. He then turned his thoughts to his closest friend's love of Armagh and Lawrence's trauma after the 1889 crash, which until 1915 was the UK's worst rail tragedy - a Victorian 9/11 that shook public confidence in train travel at the height of the golden age of railways.

With 46 children among the 88 dead and over 400 injured, the crash remained a painful memory in the Armagh of 1921, where limbless victims were a constant reminder.

Just after 10 30am on June 12, 1889 ten wooden carriages packed with a Methodist Sunday School excursion broke away on a hill and careered backwards into an upcoming passenger train.

By noon that day hundreds of relief workers mobilised across Ireland and Dublin sent Red Cross Sisters to staff Armagh City Hospital. Among those arriving from Belfast was 27-year-old Willie Lawrence.

During the train journey a preacher reading aloud from the Bible annoyed Lawrence. To the delight of other passengers, when the train pulled into Portadown, several miles from the wreckage on the Warrenpoint line, Lawrence threw the man off the train.

In his diary Holloway went on to reflect on the strange trajectory of Lawrence's colourful career that included him 'secretly' washing dishes to fund worldwide

tours as a lecturer. At the height of his fame Lawrence was paid 110 dollars a time for his lectures in the USA but couldn't cover his expenses. Sometimes as guest speaker in an uptown New York hotel, after fielding questions from audiences of Harvard and Yale graduates and rubbing shoulders with America's greatest actors and writers, he would slip away to the hotel kitchens to wash dishes before heading off on a long lonely walk back to a downtown kip.

Because he was self-taught Lawrence was outside the university circuit and consequently had no access to the grants or bursaries that academic work would normally have attracted.

The son of a Mountpottinger stationmaster in middle age he refused a directorship in Comber Distillery and, without a university education, moved to Dublin to pursue historical theatre research, spending his days in the National Library where he probably joined the Shakespeare debates made famous by James Joyce in Ulysses.

As a world authority on the Elizabethan stage and Irish theatre, Lawrence went on to write dozens of books and hundreds of essays; lecture across the USA and Europe; teach at Harvard; win honorary doctorates from Queen's University and Ireland's National University, and become a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Lawrence's work with another close friend, the poet W. B. Yeats promoting Ireland's literary revival, probably alerted Collins to his usefulness. In the

event Collins came second to Richard Best (Unionist) with Major Shillington (Unionist) and John D. Nugent (Nationalist) also elected.

Lawrence was paid £5 expenses for his work in Armagh and Collins appears to have been pleased and wrote to George Gavan Duffy: “the Armagh result... was good beyond expectations.”<sup>1</sup> Incidentally £5 was the weekly wage Collins paid the best hit men in his assassination squad.<sup>2</sup> History however was moving fast in the 1920s. Within months Collins was dead and Lawrence and his wife were exiled to London, where he scratched out a living as a columnist and theatre critic, before Yeats’ influence got him a British Civil List pension.

Today Lawrence is forgotten by all but a handful of academics. However in 1940 the Irish Times regarded his work as “among the valuable contributions to literature of this century”.<sup>3</sup>

## Corporate negligence at heart of tragedy

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In the wake of the 1889 rail tragedy Armagh was a deeply traumatized community. One of the first on the crash scene was local medical chief and former army doctor Surgeon-Major Lynn who later said: “Many a bitterly-fought battlefield did not display such carnage.”<sup>4</sup>

One relief worker was shocked into paralysis by what he saw, while a carter arriving to collect bodies dropped dead: his several daughters, who were on the train, survived. In the midst of the carnage two little girls gathered primroses as their sister lay in the grass, her body unmarked by death.

Victorian newspaper readers were spared little and the names of ‘people expected to die’ were published.

The train driver and three other railway workers were swiftly arrested and charged with manslaughter.

It quickly transpired that while 921 people bought excursion tickets many more boarded illicitly, so that guard vans and brake cars were packed. On the platform a mother who overheard the stationmaster and train driver squabbling about the overloaded train’s ability to climb a

steep gradient outside Armagh, took her children home.

With an estimated 1200 passengers aboard the engine stalled on the first hill. The driver wedged rocks behind the wheels before dividing the train. Seconds later he could only watch in horror as the disengagement jolted away the separated carriages. As the woefully inept brakes failed the rocks were pulverised to dust and an estimated 600 men, women and children began rolling towards disaster.

With carriage doors locked toddlers were saved by adults who threw them out through tiny windows as the runaway gathered speed. It reached 40mph before hitting an upcoming train that had decelerated to 5 mph.

After a coroner’s court, a magisterial hearing, two trials and a Board of Trade Investigation, the railway employees were largely exonerated.

The Times of London accused Great Northern Railways of negligence, while the Board of Trade found that individuals had made errors of judgement, but the crash would “have been prevented had the excursion train been fitted with an automatic continuous brake.”<sup>5</sup>

GNR paid out £145,000 in damages although its attitude was evident in the £200 it grudgingly contributed to a relief fund that within days reached £3,000, including £240 from the London Stock Exchange and £50 from Queen Victoria. At the end of that June GNR surpassed its previous callousness by forwarding a bill for excursion tickets to the Methodist Church treasurer.

In 1989 on the 100th anniversary of the tragedy the Rev Hamilton Skillen of Armagh Methodist Church, noting that the 1880s community was free of sectarian bitterness, called it the most ecumenical of disasters: 18 Methodists, 34 Church of Ireland, 19 Presbyterians and 9 Catholics were among the dead.

## 1921 speech presages Sinn Fein-unionist accord

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By 1921 Michael Collins’ ability to evade capture had become legendary. Early that year the authorities intensified their efforts to capture him and were on occa-

sions left red-faced by the results.

Even the loyalist newspaper the Belfast Newsletter got caught up in the romanticism building around Collins and in a news item headed “Not Michael, But John” poked fun at the arrest in Jammet’s Restaurant, Dublin of John Foley, a high-ranking official at Dublin Castle.

Apparently a large force surrounded the restaurant and bemused customers looked on as a Commanding Officer stood over Foley with a photograph in his hand and loudly declared: “You have bluffed us for the last time Michael Collins, but we have got you at last.”<sup>6</sup>

In those first few months of 1921 US customs had thwarted every effort by the IRA to smuggle out consignments of the new Thompson sub-machine-gun. However in May the first batch to get out reached Dublin and on election night, May 24 Michael Collins drove to the grounds of the Christian Brothers at Marino, County Dublin to test fire three of the weapons, which would subsequently be immortalised in gangster movies and to a lesser extent the troubles.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile that same night in Armagh Sinn Fein, nationalists and unionists were uniting to celebrate election victories. From the courthouse steps the veteran returning officer Mr T. W. Kilpatrick expressed amazement at the bitter divisions overcome in the “best-humoured” election he had ever encountered.<sup>8</sup>

Mr Kilpatrick’s speech oddly prefigures what happened in 2007 when SF’s Martin Maginness and the DUP’s Dr Ian Paisley astonished the world as the ‘Chuckle Brothers’.

Odder still is that the returning officer was standing a snowball throw away from a building that would become a landmark in the life of Ian Paisley. Next door, literally in the courthouse shadow, stood a ramshackle wooden hall, which Armagh’s new Baptist pastor and founder member, the Rev James Kyle Paisley was busy converting for use as his first church.<sup>9</sup>

Five years later in his new manse opposite Armagh railway station his baby son Ian would take the first steps on a journey that would surpass that 1921 accord and culminate in an historic power

sharing agreement with Michael Collins' successors.

By the late 1960s as the Rev Ian Paisley, an ultra Unionist, he had moved centre stage in Irish politics. It was a journey the iconic 'Thompson' also made. As the 1970s opened it remained the IRA's weapon of choice before being replaced by Armalites and AK47s.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Letter dated June 18, 1921 (See Documents on Irish Foreign Policy [www.difp.ie](http://www.difp.ie))

<sup>2</sup> Michael Collins A Biography by Tim Pat Coogan published by Hutchinson, London, 1990

<sup>3</sup> Irish Times August 14, 1940

<sup>4</sup> The Fateful Day - A Commemorative Book Of The Armagh Railway Disaster June 12, 1889 by Damian Woods

<sup>5</sup> lb

<sup>6</sup> Belfast Newsletter January 11, 1921

<sup>7</sup> Michael Collins A Biography by Tim Pat Coogan published by Hutchinson, London, 1990

<sup>8</sup> Armagh Guardian June 3, 1921

<sup>9</sup> History Armagh (Summer 2007) 'Powerful Connections' by Marjorie Halligan

<sup>10</sup> History Ireland (July/August 2009)

'Thompson submachine-gun' by Lar Joye

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# A ripping yarn from Percy French

by Eric Villiers

Researchers, despite their best efforts to stay on the trail of their chosen subject, often get waylaid by interesting snippets, which drag them off in another direction.

While searching for information about a music hall star one member of Armagh and District History Group came across a story about Percy French and one of his young Armagh fans.

According to Brendan O'Dowda - in his 1981 book on Percy French - Jack McKenna from Armagh had contacted him with a lovely anecdote that illustrated the great man's humility. The story as told by Jack and published by O'Dowda reads:

*While a schoolboy I went to the City Hall in Armagh where Mr French had given a concert the previous night. He was tearing up the pictures he had drawn the night before during his show. I helped him and when we had them all torn up, we burned them in the City Hall yard. I have regretted it ever since that I did not ask him for one of them.*

*He mentioned in the course of our conversation that there had been a good house for his show. He asked me the price of admission and I told him it was one shilling, two shillings and three shillings. Very young though I was, it struck me that he was not a businessman for he told me that, 'the prices were a robbery for listening and watching an old man amusing himself'.*

Young Jack may have wasted his breath asking for a picture because O'Dowda points out that quick fire artists were well-known for refusing to hand out such souvenirs, which may explain why, despite producing thousands during his stage act there is a scarcity of these chalk drawings by French.

French was not always averse to distributing such sketches and around 1900 made good money doing so when he worked with two other performers at the beginning of his career in Molesworth Hall, Dublin. As the famed Abbey Theatre diarist Joseph Holloway recalled in a Daily Express interview in 1927: "While Percy played the guitar and did a turn called 'Dublin Up-to-Date,' Billie Orpen, now Sir William, used to do water-colour sketches on the stage to the accompaniment of Percy's running commentary. The sketches were sold afterwards and we made as much as £120 on one performance."

It is interesting to note that Holloway was one of two star performers from the Association of Elocutionists who made appearances at the hall - the other being Maud Gonne. At that time the President of the Association was Dr George Sigerson. [2]

[1] [The World of Percy French](#) by Brendan O'Dowda, published by Blackstaff Press Ltd. (1981)

[2] [Joseph Holloway's Irish Theatre](#) edited by Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill. Published by Proscenium Press, California. (1968)