

Michael Collins in Armagh

by Des Fitzgerald

Michael Collins paid a visit to Armagh on 4th September, 1921, in what the 'Irish News' described as "*his first official visit to the city.*" The implication may well be that he had been in Armagh on I.R.A. business in the past few years, but he was now a leading figure in the Dail Eireann Cabinet. In fact, apart from appearances in the Dail, this was the first time he had appeared in public since his name became known to the world as Commander in Chief of the Republican forces.

In May 1921, Collins had been elected member for Armagh in the new Stormont Parliament, coming second to the Unionist Richard Best. He did not, of course, take his seat as neither did any of the other Sinn Fein men who were elected.

That being so, it is difficult to determine what was the precise reason for calling the meeting in Armagh. Four months had elapsed since the election so Collins was scarcely intent on thanking the Sinn Fein voters, especially as he had not topped the poll. More likely, he wanted to show, as the 'Freeman's Journal' put it, "*that if Sir James Craig and his colleagues want to do business, and, according to Lord Londonderry, peace is as vital for the North as the South, he is a man with whom business is possible.*" Negotiations were going on at the time between Downing Street and Dail Eireann and Partition was still a tense subject, so Collins may have wanted to utilize his Northern status to make peace overtures, and get publicity for his (and presumably, the Dail's) viewpoint. The 'Ulster Gazette's' view was that he was in Armagh "*ostensibly for the purpose of addressing his 'constituents' of County Armagh, but really the occasion was one for an elaborate demonstration of the strength of Sinn Fein in Mid-Ulster.*"

At any rate, the meeting was called at short notice and the organisation carried out by the local company of the Irish Volunteers. As the 'Belfast Newsletter' put it, "*The I.R.A. took control of a large*

portion of the city, and its 'police' regulated the traffic and picqueted [sic] the entrances to the Unionist quarters. Very few of the Royal Irish Constabulary were noticed on duty." Houses in the main streets were decorated with Republican Tricolours and American flags, and pictures of prominent Republicans were stretched across streets. Trains were run from Warrenpoint and Newry, Clones and Monaghan, Omagh and Dungannon and Belfast. The 'Armagh Guardian' did its homework on the train numbers: "*The ordinary train from Belfast brought only 200 from all stations, Keady special train brought 500; the Newry one 600, and that from Monaghan topped the list with 1,000. Char-a-bancs and motor cars in scores ran from Dungannon, Dundalk, Newry and many other places, so that the procession was mainly one from outside the county.*" The train from Belfast was guarded by armed troops "*fearing interference by Orange mobs,*" but things went peacefully, unlike the events on the arrival back in Belfast of the special train. The 'Freeman's Journal' records that "*at intermediate stations, such as Lisburn and Lurgan, numbers of people joined the train, which, on arriving at and leaving Portadown, was greeted with cheering and the waving of flags and handkerchiefs by many of the residents.*" Motor cars and charabancs were fully used, "*while cycle riders poured in in hundreds.*"

Collins travelled from Dublin by car, accompanied by Harry Boland, Sean O'Murthuile (Sean Hurley), Sinead Mason (Collins' secretary), Vinny Byrne and Joe Hyland. He had an interesting experience, as recorded in Frank O'Connor's biography, the previous night when "*he worked late preparing his [Armagh] speech, and when he left in company with his typist, he was challenged by two armed men. He dashed his fist into the face of one and bolted, pursued by revolver shots. They were Volunteers on a joy ride!*" Boland's diary of the day refers to "*Escort of cars and Thompsons,*" obviously a reference to the sub-machine guns carried by the I.R.A. bodyguards.

The Collins party was met by I.R.A. units at Armagh and escorted to the Charlemont Arms Hotel, conveniently close to the City Hall. After lunch addresses were presented to Collins from Armagh Urban Council and Castleblayney Urban Council. Proceedings began at 1.30 and admission was by ticket only, the building being filled completely. The Armagh address was read by Seamus O'Reilly, the Sinn Fein chairman of the City Council and the Castleblayney address by William McGrath, clerk of their District Council. The 'Ulster Gazette' commented: "*rarely has the City Hall been so densely packed as when the Republican Chief appeared on the platform The audience rose and cheered the 'hero' to the echo, and Michael simply bowed his acknowledgements.*"

It should be remembered that the City Council were not unanimously in favour of presentation of an address of welcome, but since the Unionists were in a minority the combined Sinn Fein and Nationalist vote went against them.

In his reply to the Armagh address Collins mentioned that the British forces had "*sent out their aeroplanes over the battle-fronts in Ireland and dropped leaflets to wean all local commands from the high command. The Irish people, the Irish Army, were proof against that insidious effort. It was not Germans they had to deal with in that.*" In his reply to the Castleblayney address he praised the Co. Monaghan town since it had a distinction no other place in Ulster had – it had an Auxiliary Company posted there, which proved how bitterly the Castleblayney I.R.A. were fighting.

After the proceedings ended in the City Hall everyone made their way to Greenpark where the procession formed up. The 'Ulster Gazette' reported that "*Local drapers – at all events, those who belong to the Republican side – reaped a splendid harvest. They supplied Sinn Fein colours in an enormous quantity. Even Unionist shopkeepers were called on to fulfil orders when the supplies in the Re-*

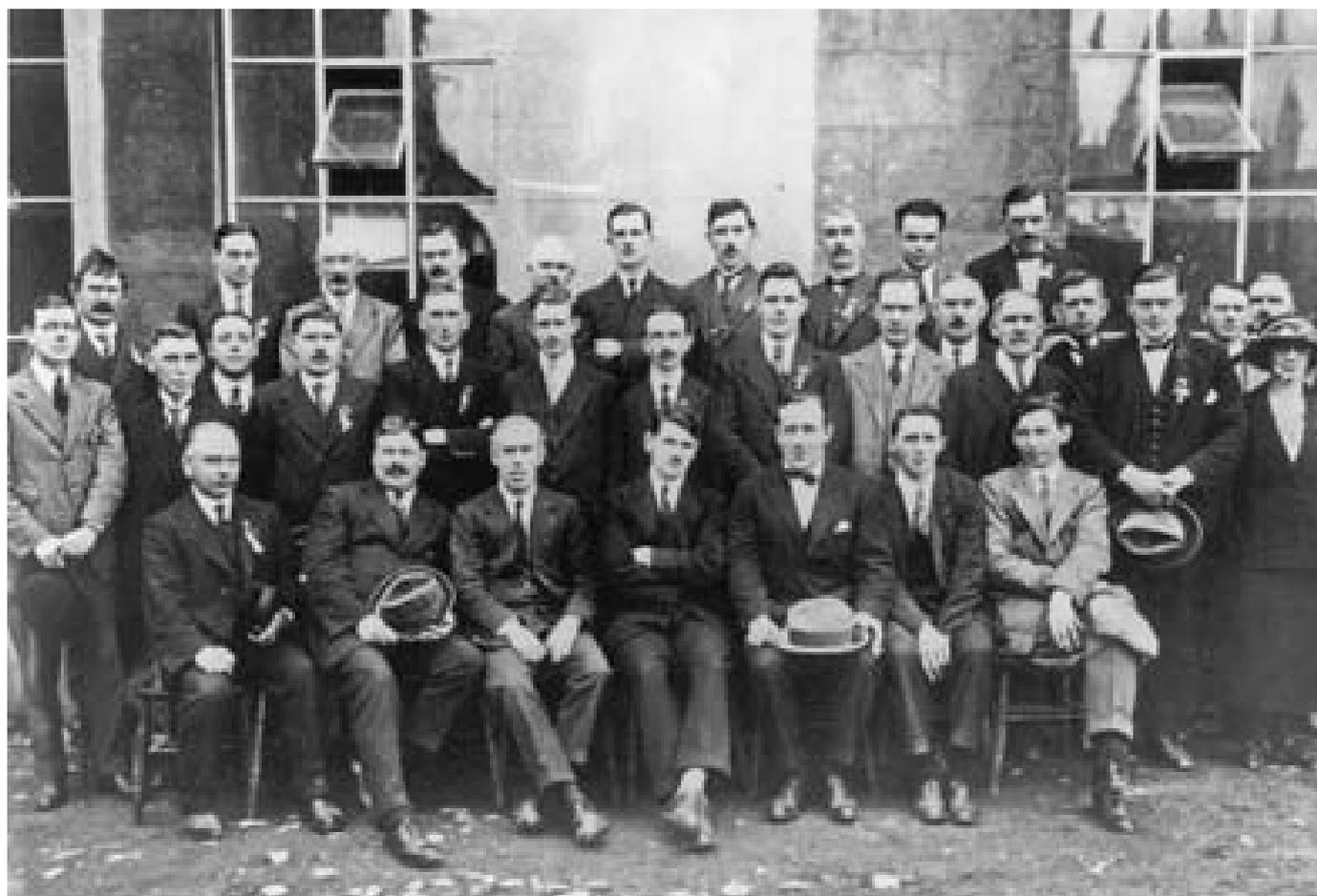
publican shops had failed.” The order was, according to the ‘Irish News’, *“Advance guard, Mr. Collins and party, 4th N. Division (part of), 5th N Division cyclists corp[sic], 2nd N Division (part of), 3rd N Division, Cumann na mBan, I.N.F. (Armagh), Brass and Reed Band, reps. of public bodies, Newry and district Sinn Fein clubs, Warrenpoint and district S.F. Clubs, Aughagallon Pipers’ Band, Lurgan and district S. F. clubs, Monaghan Brass and Reed Band, Monaghan and district S. F. clubs, Clones and District S. F. clubs, Omagh and district S. F. clubs, Carrickmore and district S. F. clubs, Dunganon and District S. F. clubs, Middletown Pipers’ Band, Middletown and district S. F. clubs, Keady Pipers’ Band, Keady and District S. F. clubs, Darkley Fife and Drum Band, Armagh and district S. F. Clubs, general public, directed by marshals.”* David Fitzpatrick, in ‘Harry Boland’s Irish Revolution’, says that *“the party was escorted by over 1,500 Volunteers and auxiliaries, 1,100 Irish National Foresters, 100 bandmen, 450 cyclists, republican police armed with hurleys....”*

The ‘Ulster Gazette’, no fan of Collins, commented on the *“visit of large contingents of rebels from the neighbouring counties of Monaghan and Tyrone to have a view of the man who had conducted the operations of the Irish Republican Army and who had managed to evade arrest by the British authorities. Had it not been for the presence of so many Sinn Fein supporters from Tyrone and Monaghan, the demonstration would have been on a small scale, for in the vast assemblage there were not more than 5000 supporters of the rebel chief from County Armagh. Monaghan supplied the largest contingent, Tyrone came next, while there were a few stragglers from Belfast and other Northern centres who were anxious to get into “close touch” with the proud Sinn Fein representative of Primatial County.”*

The procession formed up at Greenpark and made its way through the town via Ogle Street, Thomas Street, English Street, Railway Street, Banbrook Hill and Cathedral Road to the playing fields at the College Grounds. Estimates of the

numbers present differ, to some extent according to the political views of the paper. The ‘Freeman’s Journal’ thought that *“between twenty and thirty thousand people reached the city for the occasion”*; the ‘Irish News’ estimated that *“between those taking part and those on the sidewalks there were over twenty thousand people.”* The ‘Ulster Gazette’, on the other hand, said that the number at the meeting, *“was certainly very large, but the representative of a Dublin Nationalist journal [‘Freeman’s Journal’, presumably] who fixed it at 30,000 is far out. There may have been that number in the town, but the attendance at the meeting was below it considerably. Certainly, a huge crowd surrounded the platform, but when Michael Collins was addressing the assemblage there were not even 10,000 people present, and certainly not more than one-sixth of that number heard his address. Why, sometimes the reporters, who were in close proximity to the platform, could not hear the speaker distinctly.”*

The ‘Armagh Guardian’ made the point



Michael Collins in Armagh, 6th Sept. 1921 with Armagh City Council.

Front row from left to right, Michael Garvey, Sean O’ Muirthile, Eddie Donnelly, Michael Collins, Harry Boland, Tom Cullen, Joseph Dolan. **Second Row:** Tim McCormack, Michael Short, Charles Rooney, Cornelius McElroy, Patrick Fegan, E O’ Duffy, Seamus O’ Reilly, Tom Dougan, Sam Johnston, Peter Hughes, Malachy Kearney, Patrick Teague, Dr W. McKee, Seamus McGuill, John Garvey. **Back Row:** James Mallon, Frank McKee, Edward Fitzpatrick, Charles Garland, George Murnaghan, Liam Healey, John Lenagh, James Trodden, Joe McKelvey, Harry Collins.

that “as Sunday’s demonstration was so carefully organised to impress the Sinn Fein strength, it is worth comparison with other meetings. The 17 platoons and troops, which formed the militant part of the procession (counting the boys, and girls, and women) numbered 1,566 – say 1,600. The Foresters, including boys, girls and women, numbered 1,100, and the bands, say -100- total 2,800. There is not a mistake in these figures, as they were taken by four enumerators acting independently.

“Now a County Orange demonstration put, pre-war, 10,000 men in rank, and at the remembered visit of Lord Carson in 1913, 20,000 Ulster Volunteers marched behind Colonel Blacker.

“All these, be it recollected, were from County Armagh alone, whilst comparatively few of the Sinn Feiners were from the county. The others came from Co. Monaghan, but Tyrone, Antrim, Down, Louth, Cavan, and even Leitrim. Some of the cyclists (who number 450) bore the appearance of having travelled a long, long way and some admitted they had been two days on the road.

“... Enumerators differ as to the numbers in the field. English Pressmen, who are accustomed to large gatherings, consider 7,000 a very outside figure for all in the field and around it (at the roulette tables and other attractions), whilst others would not go beyond 4,000, and the military men would not go as high as 2,000 for the field alone. The supporting daily papers count all on the streets as 20,000, but, of course, many on the pavements, like A.O.H. and loyalists, were spectators. The large county A.O.H. demonstration was fully larger than Sunday’s.

“The first two or three of the platoons showed that they had some proficiency in drill, but those who followed were very slouchy and kept bad alignment. Possibly Newry, Dundalk, Belfast and South Armagh sent those big platoons which numbered 160, 184, 132 and 148 but as against this there were certainly very scratch ones of 24, 28, 32, 36 and 40. The girls in their green shirts we compared very unfavourably with the smart appearance of our Girl Guides.

“The members of the I.R.A. did not conceal the fact that they were armed with revolvers, as the bulging pockets testified. One observer, however, saw a man whose pocket bulged out draw what from its shape seemed a revolver, by accident, and it turned out to be nothing more than a clog shoe minus the heel. Query – Did those who were not possessed of revolvers carry clog soles as weapons? They might be useful in a close row,

and the bulging pocket would be a bit of stage management for bluff. It was noticed that at least three priests directed some of the I.R.A.”

The platform was ‘a blaze of colour’ and American and Republican flags flew side by side. The comment was made that “there was a very large crowd on the platform, and amongst it were observed people who were always supposed to be totally against Sinn Fein. Even in the matter of decorations those who were supposed to be rigidly attached to the United Irish League and the Ancient Order of Hibernians (the Constitutional Nationalists who do not profess to believe in Republican tactics) displayed the tricolour, and those of them were at the meeting must have been disappointed when at the mention of Mr. John D. Nugent’s name there was most vigorous booing. Every time the name of an ‘Irish Martyr’ such as Terence McSwiney, was mentioned, there was enthusiastic applause; but from the moment Michael Collins let fall from his lips the name of the Hibernian Secretary, there burst forth a torrent of indignation as has seldom been observed at Nationalist gatherings locally. How times have changed!”

Collins was approached by a Press Association journalist before his speech and was asked two questions, which he replied to in writing, on de Valera’s recent statement on negotiations with the British, and whether the situation was to be regarded as grave.

An interesting insight on Collin’s own view on the meeting is quoted in Meda Ryan’s ‘Michael Collins and the Women in his Life’. In a letter to one of his agents, Moya Llewelyn Davies, he writes of the request by the Dail to go to Armagh, “I must do it although I hate a public meeting like I hate a plague..... I’m going to endeavour making such an appeal to them as will make them rock to their foundations – at least I’m going to try.”

The meeting in the College grounds was chaired by Seamus O’Reilly, Chairman of Armagh Urban Council, who made the first speech, beginning in Irish. The next speaker was George Murnaghan junior, from Omagh, who said that if an attempt was made to govern them by the little body in Belfast [Stormont] they would in a short time break down that institution.

Eoin O’Duffy was the next speaker. He was a Castleblaney man, who had been

jailed in Belfast following his I.R.A. activity, was Liaison Officer in Belfast at the time, was later I.R.A. Chief of Staff and eventually first Civic Guard Commissioner. He said he had escaped the bombs and bullets of the Sandy Row, where he had been advised that if an Orangeman struck them on the right cheek they should turn their left cheek. He said it might be necessary to cut off Belfast from the rest of Ireland and if this were to happen, Belfast would be a deserted city in three months’ time.

The next speaker was the hero of the day, and Frank O’Connor’s description bears repetition. “When the young man with the dark moustache leaped forward and threw himself over the platform rail there was a storm of cheering. As Collins warmed to his subject, people saw for the first time that strange fierce energy of his. He leaned forward, every muscle tense, the head tossing, jerking, the curved mouth twisting in a grin of scorn and defiance. But the tone of the speech was very different from what it had been in the days when he spoke in snowstorms in Roscommon.”

Obviously, there is no room here for a summary of the speech so the course I have adopted is to reproduce the ‘Freeman’s Journal’ editorial comment: “His address at Armagh shows that Mr. Collins does not live for blood and dream only for battles. There was not even a hint of sabre-rattling in his words. If we can interpret his speech, it is a deliverance that makes for peace. Ireland has been looking for and asking for this speech. In particular, Mr. Collins dealt clearly and adequately with the Ulster question. He showed that if Sir James Craig and his colleagues want to do business, and according to Lord Londonderry, peace is as vital for the North as the South, he is a man with whom business is possible. With a negotiator of the temper and reasonableness of Mr. Collins bridge-building would not be difficult. The real difference between the parties is, after all, not so great. The tone of Mr. Collins’s speech was in harmony with Dail Eireann’s reply to Mr. Lloyd George. That reply shows how real is Ireland’s desire for peace.”

He began his speech in Irish and went on to plead (in English) for more use of and respect for the Irish language. In a biography of Collins by Gabriel Doherty and Dermot Keogh, the speech is described as coupling “a markedly conciliatory tone to-

wards the Ulster Unionist with a firm stand on Irish unity.” The ‘Belfast Newsletter’ did not comment directly on Collins’s speech but described the meeting’s speeches as ‘inflammatory’. The ‘Armagh Guardian’

struck between Sinn Fein organisers and the R.I.C. to avoid confrontations with a Royal Black Preceptory service on the Mall. So the crowds made their way back to Greenpark and dispersed.



The photograph paid for by Mrs Corr and produced from the group photograph above. PRONI. D/2886/A/2/14/54

It was at this stage of proceedings that, legend had it, Collins was brought down to Allison Studios in Scotch Street for a portrait photograph. Recent research has thrown new light on the subject. Mrs Corr of English Street had requested a photograph and whatever plans had been laid for the production thereof, in fact Allison produced a photograph from the group photograph he had taken before the meeting in the City Hall. The negative is now in the Allison collection in the Public Record Office and, on seeing it, I have no doubt it came out of the group photograph.

onwards there was intense excitement at Scotch Street and Thomas Street corners, and now and again there were attempts to break through, these being unsuccessful. But it was not until after six o'clock that anything serious occurred. Motors containing visitors were passing at a rapid rate, sometimes causing spectators, who were present in large numbers, to fly for safety. Matters assumed an ugly aspect when the occupants of two motors began to shout ‘Up the Rebels’ and other epithets.....” These may well have been the two cars which went into Thomas Street but then turned left into Dobbin Street. The ‘Armagh Guardian’s’ account runs “The first car, bound for Newry, was booked when it got to Barrack Street, and one of the apples thrown by sundry small boys who were throwing apples at one another.... passed very close to it. Instantly one of the men in the car drew a revolver and fired at the crowd, hitting nobody. His shot were[sic] immediately returned by some men in the street, and one of the motorists was hit. A second car then came up, also via Dobbin Street, and without waiting for aggression, began to fire. This fire, too, was hotly returned and the car was raced at the slope of the Newry road. The driver was apparently hurt, either by a bullet, or by the glass of the windscreen – which was shattered by a bullet – for he struck the curb, and lost time by having to change gear. Two members of this car, it is said, were hit. None of the Unionists were struck, but bullets were seen to strike the roadway, and there are the marks of several others on neighbouring walls.” The victim in the first car appears to have been a young man, Edward Hanna, of Mill Street, Newry. He was shot in the abdomen and the wound bandaged by his companions, who deemed it advisable to continue to Newry where the injured man was admitted to Newry Union Infirmary. It was stated that there were others injured but that this was the only known casualty. It was asserted that more than 150 rounds were fired. Hanna claimed £6,000 for personal injuries at the Armagh Assizes in January 1922, and was awarded £700. There was police evidence of shots having been fired from a car at the crowd but obviously there was confusion over which car the shots came from. James Trodden of Armagh claimed damages of £13: 8: 6 for damage to his car in which he was taking passengers back to Poyntzpass

had an interesting comment on the way the speech was received: “The leader of the Sinn Fein gunmen had a tremendous reception, but as he proceeded with his very carefully prepared written speech the enthusiasm died away, and the greater part was more than quietly received. The explanation was that he disappointed the extreme section. They had presumably, expected a fiery speech elaborating Mr De Valera’s scheme to clear out the loyalists, and Mr O’Duffy’s threat of the bullet, and instead heard the usual peroration on independence and freedom – so often repeated before.”

Collins’s speech was followed by speeches from Sean O Muirhuile and Harry Boland, T.D., and Eamon Donnelly closed proceedings by exhorting people to get back to their various districts as early as possible. The meeting closed with the singing of ‘The Soldier’s Song’ and cheers for Michael Collins.

The call for a quiet dispersal may have been connected with an arrangement

A service, organised by Armagh R.B.P. No. 8, had been arranged for Third Armagh Presbyterian Church on that Sunday afternoon. “The Sir Knights assembled at the Gaol Square and marched in processional order to the sacred edifice,” the ‘Ulster Gazette’ reported. After the service, to avoid trouble, the usual procession from the church to the Protestant Hall in College Street was altered and the procession returned to breakup in Gaol Square. The arrangement having been made, “some of the Brethren were so annoyed at what they considered a surrender of their rights that they declined to take part in the service.” The result was a large crowd of Unionists in Barrack Street, and the R.I.C. and Sinn Fein diverted traffic away from Scotch Street and instructed cars to leave Armagh by Irish Street, even if they were heading for Newry and Dundalk. The ‘Ulster Gazette’ however, reported that “from five o'clock

after the meeting. About 50 shots were fired at his car but nobody was injured. He was awarded £12: 10: 0. Little detail is available of the fatal shooting. The victim was a farm labourer named Quigley, who was brought home to Cortral dead in a car. He was "accidentally shot outside Armagh" but when the Dundalk R.I.C. went to investigate

they were told no information could be supplied, as the matter was in the hands of the I.R.A.

Local pedestrians were attacked in the Barrack Street area. Three young men were savagely beaten by "upwards of thirty well-dressed fellows. A young Catholic woman who intervened was also savagely beaten. One Catholic was assaulted by a crowd in Barrack

Street, and received such injuries that he had to be treated at the infirmary." (Belfast Morning News, 14th Sept.)

Collins's car was stoned near the new border at Middletown but, as Frank O'Connor records in his biography, "the Thompson gunner in the car looked longingly at his weapon, but Collins only laughed. 'Thompson guns aren't fair against stone' he said. He was still the same larkly youth. Boland and he indulged in endless horseplay, delighted to be together again. At three in the morning Collins was in his room, throwing the G.S.S.'s boots out of the window, and when the tyre was punctured the pair of them improved the occasion with pitch and toss." They spent the night in Clones and left for Dublin on Monday.

Shots were involved in the return to Belfast of the train from Armagh. Police and army (Seaforth Highlanders) awaited the arrival at Great Victoria Street about nine o'clock, but the shots apparently were not aimed at targets, more "in a spirit of bravado" as the 'Newsletter' put it. Another version has it that an Orange mob gathered outside the station and surged towards the train, recognising several Sinn Fein passengers. The shots were fired in the air in self-defence. Nevertheless, the passengers returning from weekend and seaside trips were greatly alarmed. No arrests were made.

A different type of return from Armagh was recorded in the 'Armagh Guardian'. "One motor which came to the Sinn Fein meeting on Sunday week had an unusual mishap. The occupants, probably unused to motor travelling lounged back with an air of grand weariness, smoking cigarettes, throwing the ends over their shoulders. After some time they smelt smoke, but gave it no heed, probably thinking it came from the exhaust. Next thing was a burst of flame from the hood, and all they could do by beating it with their caps could not save it. This was bad enough, but to their annoyance they found their new headgear was so singed as to be all but unwearable. And then, to cap their misfortune, they found that a spare tyre on the back of the car was destroyed. These patriots will remember the 4th of September."

Acknowledgement:

Photograph of Michael Collins on p10 is reproduced with permission of the Deputy Keeper of Records of the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland

The Defence of Scotch Street Bridge, Armagh
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 4th, 1921.

When the rebel hordes paraded, on that peaceful Sabbath day,
With flags and banners waving, and bands in grand array,
They thought to scare the Loyalists, who lived in Armagh town,
But the fear was with the other side, before the night closed down.
There were murderers from Maghery, and tramps from Crossmaglen,
Hooligans from Keady, and rogues from moor and fen ;
There were cutthroats from Killeavy, and others from the bogs,
All gathered in our City like mangy mongrel dogs.
First came the guard of honour, a sorry looking crew,
With woe begone expressions, and full of mountain dew;
There were scavengers from the Shambles, and loafers from the Rocks,
Who stepped in front of " Mickey," like a bunch of banty cocks.
Now Owen Duffy made a speech, 'twas marvellous it was said,
To hear him tell the Rebels the way to use the lead,
Against the Loyal Ulstermen, who won't acknowledge Rome,
And who only want the privilege, of supporting Britain's Throne.
After listening to the speeches, and drinking deep of rum,
The rebels then decided for to have a little fun,
So they filled a Ford with gunmen, to give the Orangemen lead,
And drove right down through Scotch Street, with murder in their heads.
When the car got down to Palace Row, a rebel pulled a gun,
And fired at the Orangemen, to see how they would run ;
'Twas the first and last shot he fired, for I heard a Webley crack,
And the gunman sat down suddenly, with a bullet in his back.
Then for the next few minutes, the rebels couldn't tell,
Where all the bullets came from, for the Orangemen gave them Hell ;
You could hear the Webleys roaring, and the Automatics bark,
And the groanings of the rebels as the bullets found their mark.
The car drove on like blazes, with its body full of lead,
And the gunmen moaning loudly, as they left a trail of red ;
The living dropped their Webleys, and cowered down behind,
The bodies of their comrades, protection for to find.
Some hundred yards behind the first, there came a second car,
Packed full with murderous gunmen, intent on bloody war ;
And as they heard the burst of fire, come from the Orangemen there,
Each murderous rebel pulled his gun, and prayed his murderous prayer:
"O Mary, Holy Mary," to whom the Romans pray,
A Roman's life, a Roman's soul, take thou in charge this day,
And grant each one of us to take, full toll of Orange lives,
But their murderous prayer was answered there, with the drone of "Forty Fives."
Ov! well indeed may Newry weep, and well may Dundalk mourn,
And well Poyntzpass may cry " alas," for those who'll ne'er return ;
And ne'er again 'gainst Orangemen, in the open they will dare,
To shoot down those they thought unarmed, lest worse again they'd fare.
In the heart of every Ulsterman, true loyalty doth grow,
In the veins of Border County men, the "Diamond" blood doth flow;
But if ever " shiners " come again, intent to do us ill,
At Scotch Street Bridge they'll find again, a second " Diamond Hill!"
WALDON.