

## Come Out Ye Black and Tans

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

The Royal Irish Constabulary were the armed police force of Ireland from 1822 to 1922. The force was mainly comprised of Catholics although the higher ranks were predominantly Protestant. Among its first duties in the nineteenth century, were the forceable seizure of land and subsequently tenant evictions from the Catholic population as well as the Presbyterian minority. Many of the RIC constables were sons of tenant farmers or small farmers or businessmen or often the second son who wasn't expected to inherit anything. It was a good job with a pension, which in a poor country was something to be valued.

By the time of the war of independence, the RIC was in some trouble. After the Easter Rising, recruitment had slowed, and the numbers necessary to take the campaign to the IRA weren't there. It was also the fact that the IRA directly targeted the RIC, as the most visible symbol of the British Government throughout Ireland. The IRA burnt barracks and raided them for their guns and ammunition, and they made the RIC into a hated symbol of the British authorities. By the early twentieth century many RIC lived in localities, that were different from the localities they were born in. They were ostracized in the communities they worked in. To illustrate this point, in Co. Cork, frustrations were revealed in an incident when a farmer refused to shake hands with a constable in a pub. That constable was later summoned for assault, for trying to force a handshake, exclaiming, "I'm just as good an Irishman as you."



In January 1920, one hundred years ago, the British Government placed advertisements in British Newspapers for men willing to "face a rough and dangerous task." The jobs offered were as temporary constables in the Royal Irish Constabulary. The target market for the employed were ex-servicemen who knew how to handle weapons and who had survived the horrors of the Great War. Recruits were around 7,000 altogether, were trained for about 3 months and then sent to Ireland. Such a large influx caught the RIC unaware and a lack of uniforms

meant the temporary constables were dressed in Khaki trousers and dark police tunics. Their attire reminded Limerick journalist, Christopher O'Sullivan, of the coloring of the Kerry Beagles that made up the famous Black and Tan hunt on the Limerick/Tipperary border, so the name stuck. They were paid ten shillings per day plus board and lodging at a time when the pay for a British Army private was little more than a shilling a day. So, in order to counteract the early successes and intense pressure from the IRA, the British Government recruited the infamous Black and Tans into the RIC. The Black and Tans were brought in to shore up the ability of the RIC to take the fight to the IRA. Never noted for their military discipline, the RIC Temporary Constabulary make their stamp, with gusto, by orchestrating a reign of terror, full of reprisals, as we move into late 1920 and 1921. It was the Black and Tan units that torched Balbriggan (outside Dublin) where 50 houses were burned, and two suspected "Sinn Feiners" were beaten and stabbed to death. And with some outside assistance, the center of Cork City, burning more than 300 buildings in the southern capital. Those responsible for the Cork City burning proudly displayed burnt corks in their caps for a time thereafter.

A few myths have evolved about the Black and Tans: They were not responsible for the shooting of civilians on Bloody Sunday at Croke Park, that was largely the work of the even more vicious Auxiliary Division, the notorious 'Auxies' which were comprised of former WW1 officers. And Tom Barry did not attack the Black and Tans at the Kilmichael ambush in November 1920, as the words of the song would have it. The 17 security force fatalities at Kilmichael were also Auxiliaries.

But during the war of Independence, better known as 'the Tan war', no one really made too many distinctions between the various forces who terrorized the towns and villages of the country. Their philosophy can be described in the words of a RIC Colonel Gerald Smyth, stationed in Listowel, Co Kerry in June 1920. In his address to a group of constables, Smyth advised that suspicious looking persons should be shot on sight. "You may make mistakes occasionally and innocent persons may be shot, but that cannot be helped, you are bound to get the right parties some time."

One of the most tragic deaths of the period was that of Ellen Quinn, from Kiltartan, Co Galway. On November 1, 1920, while waiting for her husband's return, she was shot and fatally wounded while sitting on a wall outside her house holding her nine-month-old baby in her arms and within two months of childbirth. The shot came from a passing police lorry. Her death was powerfully evoked in W. B. Yeats poem, *Reprisals*:

Where may new-married women sit  
To suckle children now? Armed men  
May murder them in passing by  
Nor parliament, nor law take heed.

It was little wonder that the Black and Tans were feared and hated in equal measure.