

# The Shooting of Tom Shannon, forgotten hero of the War of Independence in West Clare

By Eoin Shanahan



Tom Shannon's mortuary card (Source: Michael Shannon, Moyasta)

On April 7<sup>th</sup> 1921 The Irish Times carried a report from Dublin Castle on the killing of a respected West Clare farmer and Sinn Féin magistrate named Tom Shannon. The report stated that Shannon, who had served as a magistrate in the popular Sinn Féin Courts, had attempted to distance himself from Sinn Féin when he found himself in disagreement with court methods. Furthermore, the Castle claimed that he had refused to pay local Sinn Féin rates - the inference being that the killing had been carried out by fellow republicans.<sup>1</sup> To this day, this exercise in propaganda has not been effectively challenged.

## The shooting

Forty-year-old Tom Shannon farmed a substantial holding at Moyasta, where he lived with his wife Bridget. On Sunday night 13 March 1921 he took a lighted lantern and went outside to the cabin to tend to his cows. Meanwhile, Bridget undressed and went to bed. At about 21.30 Bridget heard the dog barking and the footsteps of what she believed to be two men passing through the stone stile at the front of the house. The subsequent knocking on the front door would go unanswered for up to ten minutes until Tom returned to the house. His repeated calls for his visitors

to identify themselves were met with demands that he open the door. The voice from outside asked "Are you Mr. Shannon?" He answered "Yes" and he was again ordered to open the door. Finally, holding the lantern in one hand, he undid the bolt with the other. With the words "You'll open the door now" his assailant aimed a revolver at his neck and fired, the bullet entering just above the left collar bone and exiting at the level of the seventh vertebrae on the right of Shannon's spine. When Bridget found him lying on the floor at the door of the kitchen she asked who had done this and her husband said that he didn't know. She ran for help to neighbour John Keane's house but Tom died within fifteen minutes. It was a long night in the Shannon home and some neighbours, afraid to venture outside to call a priest, spent the night consoling Bridget.<sup>2</sup>

### **Court of Inquiry**

At 11.30 next morning an armed party of RIC and officers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Scots arrived at the house for the purpose of holding a court of inquiry in lieu of inquest. Under the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act, inquests had been replaced by Military Courts of Inquiry since August 1920. Previously, inquests had regularly returned verdicts of murder against Crown forces so the new system allowed for more control of the findings. Needless to say, there was great public mistrust of these courts and victims' relatives often refused to co-operate with them. In some cases, where such courts might find it difficult to avoid incriminating British forces, the authorities simply didn't hold Military Inquiries at all, such as in the cases of those who were killed in the aftermath reprisals of the Rineen Ambush on September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1920.<sup>3</sup> In other cases, the inquiry reports were deliberately deprived of medical evidence. In the case of Tom Shannon, the inquiry was postponed for a week due to Bridget Shannon's emotional state. Significantly, at the re-convened inquiry on Monday March 21<sup>st</sup>, one critical piece of evidence - that Tom's killers spoke with a strange accent - was not included in Bridget's signed statement. It may have been this omission by the court that prompted an approach to The Clare Champion, which published the correct version of events on March 26<sup>th</sup> 1921. This account brought to public knowledge the fact that the killers' accents were not local and it left the reader in no doubt that Tom, up to the time of his death, had been a proud and respected member of the Arbitration Courts.<sup>4</sup> Predictably, the Court of Inquiry reported findings of murder by person or persons unknown. This cleared the way for Dublin Castle to peddle the story that Shannon had been killed by fellow republicans and this version of events was subsequently repeated in a number of publications.<sup>5</sup>

### **Who shot Tom Shannon?**

While it is not possible at this time to determine who was responsible for the shooting of Tom Shannon, there is little doubt that he was shot by British forces. At a subsequent compensation hearing, County Court Judge

Matthias Bodkin stated that there was no evidence of any quarrel with Sinn Féin and that there was only one conclusion any rational man could come to.<sup>6</sup> Bill Haugh, Adjutant and O.C. A.S.U. West Clare Brigade, believed that the deed was done by Black and Tans from Kilkee.<sup>7</sup> But the attribution of the Shannon assassination to the Black and Tans warrants caution, since the notorious hybrids were wrongly blamed for some of the most brutal killings of the period in West Clare. Many of these killings were in fact the hot-blooded and rather brutal work of Royal Scots soldiers, whose *modus operandi* differed from that of the Shannon killing.<sup>8</sup> However, there can be little doubt that for one year beginning in June 1920 there existed in the RIC a policy of “secret murder” that was sanctioned at the highest level of government. Evidence of this policy is found in a report by Brigadier-General Cecil Prescott-Decie, RIC Divisional Commissioner, to John Taylor, Assistant Under-Secretary at Dublin Castle which described a besieged police force where morale was so low that his men were “...very near throwing up the sponge.” Prescott-Decie continued

*I have been told the new policy and plan and I am satisfied, though I doubt its ultimate success in the main particular - the stamping out of terrorism by secret murder. I still am of the opinion that instant retaliation is the only course for this, and until it is stamped for good and all, the same situation is only likely to recur.*

The “secret murder” referred to by Prescott-Decie would be directed at prominent and well-respected people in the community as well as frontline republican activists.<sup>9</sup> Often, the victims were elected representatives and it was believed that targeting them would “...shock the general public into submission...”<sup>10</sup> Two such killings took place in Limerick on the night of 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> March 1921 - just a week before the shooting of Tom Shannon - when mayor Seoirse Clancy and former mayor Michael O’Callaghan were assassinated in their homes in what would become known as the Curfew Murders. The circumstances of the shooting of Tom Shannon were remarkably similar to the shooting of the mayors. In each of the three cases, the assassins struck at night and announced their presence by loud knocking on the front door, after which they ascertained the identity of their victims. The killers spoke with distinctive accents and all three victims were shot in the hallway of their homes. When Clancy refused to go outside with the raiders the man who shot him said “Then take this”. Shannon’s reluctance to open the door was met with “You’ll open the door now” just before he was shot. All victims were highly respected members of the community, having been elected to positions of honour. Finally and in typical fashion, Dublin Castle mischievously inferred that all three were shot as a consequence of local disputes.

It is likely that Clancy and O’Callaghan were shot and killed by a gang of Auxiliary cadets, led by one George Montague Nathan, who were billeted at the nearby Cruises Hotel.<sup>11</sup> And while it may not be inferred that the same gang were responsible for Shannon’s death, the similarities in the

circumstances of the outrages lend some considerable weight to the theory that Shannon, like Clancy and O'Callaghan one week before, was a victim of RIC sponsored "secret murder" as described by Prescott Decie and that members of either the Auxiliary Division or Black and Tans were responsible.

### **Death lottery**

Perspectives on the arbitrary nature of the Shannon killing were illuminated by a number of October 1947 newspaper reports of the death of another former West Clare Sinn Féin magistrate. These reports stated that early in 1921 the names of five local Sinn Féin magistrates were put up for lottery to be shot by British forces and Tom Shannon's name was drawn.<sup>12</sup> Locally, it was believed by some that the shooting was in retaliation for the killing of Kilkee-based Alan Lendrum, Resident Magistrate in The British court system, following an ambush at Caherfeenick on September 22nd 1920. Lendrum's court sittings had been quite poorly attended due to the popularity and success of the recently-formed Sinn Féin Arbitration Courts.

### **Forgotten hero**

Because the victims of the Limerick assassinations had held high office, the Curfew Murders dominated the headlines for some time, while reports of Shannon's killing commanded few column inches. And while Clancy and O'Callaghan are rightly remembered in their native city and in the history books, the Moyasta magistrate has been largely forgotten in his native West Clare. Tom Shannon, quiet man of integrity, wisdom and honour, was buried in Old Shanakyle Cemetery, Kilrush on Wednesday March 16<sup>th</sup> 1921. The only monument to his memory is the headstone over his grave.



Arbitration Court sitting, Summer 1920.\_ (Source: *Capuchin Annual* 1970, p.383)



1Irish Times, April 7<sup>th</sup> 1921, p. 5.

2NAUK, WO 159A, Report of proceedings of court of Inquiry into the death of Thomas Shannon.

3See Eoin Shanahan, *The Blackened Tans* in Clare Association Yearbook (2014).

4Mr. Thos Shannon's Death, *The Clare Champion*, March 26th 1921.

5Martin Staunton, *Kilrush and the Munster Fusiliers: the experience of an Irish town in the First World War* in *Old Limerick Journal*, Vol 35, Winter Edition, 1993; Irish Times, April 7<sup>th</sup> 1921, p. 5.

6*Irish Independent*, May 31<sup>st</sup> 1921, p.6. Judge Bodkin awarded Bridget Shannon £3,000 in compensation for her husband's death.

7Liam Haugh, BMH, WS 474, p. 27.

8See Eoin Shanahan, *The Blackened Tans* in Clare Association Yearbook (2014).

9David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life 1913-1921: provincial experience of war and revolution*, (Cork, 1977), pp. 29, 30; Gabriel Doherty and John Borgonovo, *Smoking Gun? RIC Reprisals, Summer 1920* in *History Ireland* Vol. 17, No. 2 (Mar/Apr, 2009), pp. 36-39.

10*Sinn Féin Magistrate Shot* in *The Banner*, (New York, 1963).

11Tom Twomey, *Limerick Leader*, June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012, p. 20.

12Obituary, Mr. P.J. Shanahan, Doonbeg, *The Clare Champion*, 11 October 1947; Obituary, Mr. P.J. Shanahan, *The Clare Champion*, October 18<sup>th</sup> 1947; *Irish Independent*, October 8<sup>th</sup> 1947, p.5. (*The author acknowledges the research support of Geoff Simmons*).