

THE TERRIBLE TWENTIES

by Mike McCormack, Historian

Happy New Year and welcome to 2020. It is the centennial of a notable year in Irish history. We don't celebrate tragedies like Cromwell's ethnic cleansing or the Great Hunger, but the innocent victims of those pathetic events must be remembered as well as the people and circumstances that caused them so that they may never happen again.

One hundred years ago, Ireland experienced the Terrible Twenties and it was a frightening place to be. It all started, happily enough, with a post-war national election in December 1918, in which the Irish people voted for independence by electing 79 of 105 parliamentary seats to Sinn Fein and the Irish Party. In January 1919, the 6 Irish Party delegates took their seats in Westminster while the 73 other delegates decided to form their own Parliament in Dublin and thus, Dail Eireann was born. The fact that they chose to sit and govern close to their constituents left them out of British control so, despite the fact that they were legally elected, the British declared them illegal. But that did not diminish Irish support for the new assembly as the first meeting of Dáil Éireann restated the goal of independence. The Irish Volunteers, Hibernian Rifles and Irish Citizen Army combined into the military arm of the new government as the Army of the Irish Republic and the IRA was born with Michael Collins as their head. The British tried to suppress Dail Eireann with the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) and the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), but a \$2-1/4 million fund raising campaign in Ireland and America organized by Collins allowed the Dail to function. The IRA hit RIC barracks securing arms and ammunition and were gradually getting the upper hand as RIC men resigned and recruitment fell off. Those RIC who remained active were determined to kill the Irish Republic in its infancy. When the Brits used informers and double agents, Collins created an intelligence network to uncover them and warn them to leave Ireland. If they remained they would be beaten and if they still remained, they would be shot. Collins knew that eliminating these agents and their accumulated knowledge would handicap the British intelligence network. This provoked the military into brutal retaliation, often against civilians, which only served to amplify support for the IRA.

Then, in 1920, 100 years ago, the Crown implemented a policy that stands to this day as one of the most brutal in modern times. Needing more men in police uniforms, Churchill recruited returning military from WWI, some of whom were traumatized by war and had returned to find unemployment since no firms needed men whose primary skill was combat. The sole attraction to Churchill's offer was not national pride, but the 10 shillings a day wages. They were given 3-months training – hardly enough to convert men from a battlefield mentality to police functions, as their heavy-handed tactics against the civilian population soon showed. The first units arrived in Ireland in March 1920 and were sent to scattered RIC barracks. Without enough uniforms, they were given a mixture of military khaki pants and dark RIC jackets. The Irish called them the 'Black and Tans' from a similar-colored breed of hounds. It became immediately apparent that these men were more familiar with methods for eliminating an enemy than protecting a civilian population. Rather than seeking out Republican forces, it was easier to treat the entire population as the enemy since they believed that all civilians supported the Dail. On 20 March 1920, they shot dead AOH member and Sinn Fein Lord Mayor of Cork, Thomas MacCurtain, in front of his wife and children on his 36th birthday. The official inquest gave a verdict of wilful murder against Prime Minister Lloyd George and members of the RIC. Michael Collins gave MacCurtain's pistol to his Squad and ordered them to hunt down and kill Inspector Swanzy, who had ordered the attack. He had been transferred away for his safety, but was found in Lisburn, Co Armagh and shot dead with MacCurtain's revolver. The Tans escalated a policy of destruction of property and indiscriminate shootings to instill fear in the population which only strengthened support for the IRA. Despite the fact that many DMP and RIC were Irish themselves, there was no sympathy for them since in the eyes of the people they wore the uniform of the oppressor and had chosen to fight against their homeland and its citizens. In mid-1920, Churchill, seeing that the Tans weren't gaining the upper hand, further militarized the RIC by creating an Auxiliary Division to be made up of ex-officers rather than just ex-soldiers. However, the applicants were not what Churchill pictured as most upper class officers had returned to successful civilian lives and what he got were mainly working class men who had received battlefield commissions. The Auxies, as they were called, were higher paid and surpassed the Black and Tans in brutality. Drive-by shootings and looting were common, women were head-shaved and raped and entire towns like Balbriggan were destroyed; they even burned the center of Cork City, afterward wearing a piece of burnt cork in their caps to taunt the Irish. The stories of those who lived through the terrible 20s have been preserved in

remembered. They are all at rest now, 100 years later, and we pray that they will never be forgotten for they stood tall for Irish independence despite the brutality imposed on them by Britain's DMP and RIC.

Yet today, believe it or not, Charlie Flanagan, a Dail Eireann TD, has forgotten his nation's history. He actually criticized others for wearing the Easter Lily in memory of Irish patriots as being divisive; while he wears a poppy in memory of the Brits killed in WWI. He now wants to erect a memorial to members of the DMP and RIC (Tans and all) who were killed during the War of Independence and, of all places; he wants to do it in Cork. He claims it is in the spirit of universal unity, since some of them were Irish. The best thing that has come out of this controversy is that the decades-old recording by the Wolfe Tones – Come Out Ye Black and Tans – has resurfaced as Number One on the Irish musical charts. We believe that Mr. Flanagan's suggestion should be considered right after America erects memorials to the Weather Uunderground, the Manson family and Murder Incorporated – after all, they were all American.