

Michael Collins Rendezvous with Death

Michael Collins left Dublin on 20 August 1922, setting in motion what would become his final hours of life and a place in Irish history books. Sineád Dunlop takes a look at the events that occurred on that fateful day and ambush at Béal na mBláth.

When Michael Collins left Dublin on Sunday 20th August 1922, he wasn't feeling well - the doctor advised him to shelve his journey but Collins determinedly carried on regardless and his fleet left Portobello Barracks in Dublin, at 5:15am, making its first stop at Maryborough Jail, where Collins talked about moving some of the prisoners there to Gormanstown camp to alleviate the overcrowding issue. He also spoke with some of the inmates, including Tom Malone, about finishing the Civil War. He asked if Tom would go to a meeting to,

"...try to put an end to this damned thing."

As he left, he punched one fist into his hand and exclaimed, "that fixes it - the three Toms [that is, Malone, Tom Barry, and Tom Hales] will fix it."

The fleet then drove to Roscrea Barracks for an assessment. At Limerick Barracks, the Commanding Officer of the Southern Command, General Eoin O'Duffy, met Michael and stated that the Civil War would be finished soon and understood that Collins wanted to avoid any hostility. The fleet then drove through Mallow and spent that night in Cork City, where they stayed at the military HQ of the Imperial Hotel. Collins spent quality time that night with his sister Mary Collins-Powell, and her son, Seán and the rest of the evening was spent in dialogue with the O/C of the area, General Emmet Dalton. Dalton felt that,

".....normality and law and order would not be too far off. We were in possession of the principal towns in County Cork. Michael Collins and I discussed this on the journey through West Cork."

On Monday 21st August Michael went with General Emmet Dalton to the Cork Examiner to deliberate about the general Free State stance on publicity with Tom

Crosbie, the editor. After this visit, Collins went to several banks to try and unearth republican/IRA/anti-Treaty funds deposited during their occupation of the city. The previous month the IRA had gathered £120,000 in customs revenue and hid the cash in the bank accounts of supporters. When Michael Collins appeared at each bank he told the manager to shut the doors and things would swiftly be back to normal if they fully complied.

Michael then got the bank managers to single out the suspicious accounts, then he deduced that,

"three first-class men will be necessary to conduct a forensic investigation of the banks and the Customs and Excise in Cork."

He told William Cosgrave to consider three people but,

"don't announce anything until I return."

Collins and Emmet then drove around 30 miles to Macroom where Michael met IRA leader Florence O'Donoghue, who was neutral in the Civil War. The first chapter of the Civil War was ended, O'Donoghue later recorded. Emmet and many others conceded at this point that the IRA/Republicans couldn't win the war and that Michael came south searching for peace.

Collins was urgently attempting

to bring the War to a close, as well as trying to give some face-saving deal to the leaders on the other side. Some people have suggested he asked Florence how to put an end to the War and to arbitrate for him. That afternoon Emmet and Michael headed out to review the military in Cobh, returning to Cork in the early part of the evening.

That Fateful Day

At 6:15am on 22 August, Collins and his convoy left their hotel. The military detail was far too small for the protection of the Free State Commander-in-Chief, because they'd be driving through some of the most active anti-Treaty areas of south Cork.



*"Keep up the good work!
'Twill soon be over."*

The fleet went through Macroom towards Béal na mBláth about 8am where it stopped to ask for directions, then through Crookstown and in to Bandon. In Bandon, Michael fleetingly met with Major General Seán Hales, O/C of the Free State forces in West Cork. Many believe Hales was briefed about a meeting Collins had planned with Civil War neutrals in Cork that evening and that he had met with O'Donoghue and others the day before and discussed how an end to the War could be reached.

The fleet stopped for lunch at Callinan's Pub in Clonakilty, then drove to Roscarberry and Michael had a drink in his cousin Jeremiah's pub, Four Alls Pub at Sam's Cross where he proclaimed:

"I'm going to settle this thing. I'm going to put an end to this bloody war."

There was still no sign he was open to finding a middle ground. Evidently, any hope he had of settling the Civil War wouldn't

be done at the expense of the Treaty. Michael told his brother Johnny, that he would,

"...go further with the British government once there was peace here."

His main objective was to end the Civil War. He said,

"The British have given up their claim on us. When we begin to work together we can help those in the northeast."

On the way back, Michael and his men passed by what remained of his childhood home and he pointed to the stone walls and looked at Dalton,

"There is where I was born. That was my home."

Dalton would later state that this was the happiest he'd seen Michael,

"He was able to let himself go, and also I think he felt things were now moving his way. He didn't say much as we traveled along the flat road towards Bandon, he appeared lost in the myriad thoughts of a crowded and successful day."

The men left Skibbereen at 5pm and drove back to Cork.

On the journey Michael met his pal John Sullivan. The convoy took a detour around Clonakilty on the way back because of a roadblock and stopped in Bandon for tea. No one is sure why the fleet returned this same way they came out in the morning, however when the anti-Treaty forces left Cork city they blew up most of the bridges and cut most of the roads, so there were few passable ways to travel in Co. Cork. He ran into Hales, who was the brother of Tom Hales, by coincidence a member of the ambush party. As they parted he shouted,

"Keep up the good work! 'Twill soon be over."

On the road out of Bandon, Collins said to Dalton;

"If we run into an ambush along the way, we'll stand and fight them."

Dalton didn't reply.

Very early in the morning of Tuesday 22nd August, the ambush group met in Long's Pub (which was owned by Denis Long, the lookout who recognised Collins' convoy as it passed through Béal na mBláth).

The men who mustered at Béal na mBláth weren't a column, but officers trained in guerrilla warfare who congregated to hold a pre-arranged staff meeting. When Florence O'Donoghue met with the surviving members of the

IRA/Republicans in 1964, they said they didn't know that Collins was in the locality until that morning. The scheme to attack the convoy was decided as part of the general policy of attacking all Free State convoys, not as a particular plan to ambush this fleet.

The IRA/Republicans stopped a Clonakilty man, Jeremiah O'Brien and seized his cart to block the road. In combination with the mine they were situating on the road, the ambushers were aware the convoy would have to halt abruptly. The ambushers waited all day - but nothing. Late afternoon, a message was received that Collins' party was in Bandon, but as it was thought unlikely that the convoy would come through Béal na mBláth a second time, they began to dismantle the mine and clear out.

The Ambush

Originally, there were 30 ambushers, some men stayed all day, others came and went. When Collins finally arrived at Béal na mBláth at 7.30 pm many of the original ambushers had already left. When the first shots were



fired, Dalton shouted:

“Drive like hell.”

Collins countermanded the order just as he had forecasted and roared:

“Stop, we’ll fight them.”

Collins and Dalton first fired from behind the armoured car, and then Collins screamed, “there - they are running up the road.”

The Lewis machine gun in the armoured car jammed several times, and when it did the IRA/Republicans took advantage of the hiatus in firing to move their positions.

Then, Collins ran about fifteen metres up the road, dropped into a prostrate firing position, and continued shooting at the IRA/anti-Treaty men.

Dalton would later say how he heard the faint cry,

“Emmet, I’m hit.”

Dalton and Commandant Seán O’Connell ran over to where Collins was lying and found a,

“fearful gaping wound at the base of his skull behind the right ear. We immediately saw that General Collins was almost beyond human aid. O’Connell now knelt beside the dying, but still conscious Chief, whose eyes were wide open and normal, and whispered into the ear of the fast-sinking man the words of the Act of Contrition. For this he was rewarded with a light pressure of the hand. Very gently I raised his head on my knee and tried to bandage his wound but owing to the awful size of it this proved very difficult. I had not completed this task when the big eyes quickly closed, and the cold pallor of death overspread the General’s face. How can I describe the feelings that were mine in that bleak hour, kneeling in the mud of a country road not twelve miles from Clonakilty, with the still bleeding head of the Idol of Ireland resting on my arm.”

Post Ambush

The ambush was over in half-an-hour, and before it ended, darkness had fallen so it was impossible to get off an aimed shot. No one in the anti-Treaty party fully knew that Collins had been shot or that the convoy suffered any casualty. It was only when Shawno Galvin came back to Béal na mBláth that they got the first news of any casualties.



Who was responsible?

There are many conspiracy theories regarding Collins’s death. Some Republicans believe that Collins was killed by a British ‘plant’. Some Pro-Treaty accounts claim that de Valera ordered his assassination. There are some who believe that Collins was actually murdered by one of his own men – Jock McPeak who defected to the Republican side three months later. Some witnesses have since claimed there was a bullet entry wound to the front of his head, while others say it was a ricochet bullet that killed him. There was no post mortem, and little investigation at the time, with many questions unanswered some suggest there may indeed have been a cover up.

What is certain on that day the 22nd of August 1922 Michael Collins met his appointment with death and Ireland lost a truly dynamic and capable leader.

...kneeling in the mud of a country road not twelve miles from Clonakilty, with the still bleeding head of the Idol of Ireland resting on my arm...”



Last photo of Collins alive at rear left of motor

