Massacre in Mayo and the fatal error that followed it...

The Maamtrasna Murders
By Margaret Kelleher
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ON THE night of 17th August 1882 a group of seven armed men dressed in white bainin vests entered a thatched cottage in Maamtrasna on the Galway-Mayo border. On they went, five members of the Joyce family were dead or dying.

The discovery of the bodies led to a manhunt. Two days later 10 local men were identified by neighbours as members of the raiding party, some of them relations of the deceased.

There was enormous pressure on the authorities to secure convictions, not least because only three months previously the state had been rocked to its core by the assassination in the Phoenix Park in Dublin of the Chief Secretary for Ireland Lord Frederick Cavendish and his Under-secretary Thomas Burke. Above all the country was at war over land and in a period of unparalleled land agitation – the Land War.

Two years before in 1880, the Irish National Land League organised their historic campaign of isolation against the land agent of Lord Erne, Captain Boycott at nearby Lough Mask, just 12 miles from Maamtrasna.

In 1882 alone there had been the killings of land bailiffs in Castleslany, county Kerry and at Lough Mask itself. And it was rumoured that the motive for the attack on the Joyce family on the night of 17th August was because a member of their family was believed to have acted as an informer in the investigation into the killing of the Lough Mask bailiff, Joseph Huddy and his grandson John.

This new book by Margaret Kelleher pivots not so much on the political context of the murders but rather illuminates the language and cultural issues that surrounded the subsequent trials and the guilty verdicts that became a cause célèbre for Irish Nationalists at the time. In the 1840s Ireland was not only going through an extended period of agitation over land but was adjusting to the mass emigration and social upheaval wrought by the Famine. One major feature of that period of enforced transition post-Famine was the language shift from Irish to English.

Nevertheless, at the time of the Maamtrasna murders while some of the 10 accused spoke or understood English, some were monoglot Irish – speaking Gaelic only. The accused around whom much of the book centres, Macdha Seoighe (in English, Myles Joyce) was one of the latter, speaking only Irish.

Because of the fear of jury tampering, the trial of the 10 accused, which would normally have been held at the Galway assizes, was transferred to the Special Commission Court at Green Street in Dublin, a venue which had seen many historic trials and was to be reconstituted in more modern times as the Special Criminal Court.

Tom O’Dwyer served for 28 years as an industrial official before his retirement in 2009. His career began in Wynn’s Hotel and the Burlington Hotel, where he was also to become a trade union activist and shop steward.

TOM O’DWYER

Obituary

Tom O'Dwyer

Tom was an excellent colleague to all, often mentoring young officials and shop stewards.

He excelled in championing the rights of all workers but especially those working in the hotels and catering industry.

He was highly experienced in appearing before the Employment Appeals Tribunal and especially liked the opportunity to cross-examine witnesses in any case.

He loved defending workers and their rights. Such was his enthusiasm and persistence that he earned the nickname ‘Pedroceli’, after a character in the 1970s American TV legal drama of the same name. Tom was an excellent colleague to all, often mentoring young officials and shop stewards.

He willingly shared with them his lifelong love and experience of the trade union movement. He was also always willing to learn from others.

Tom was compassionate, astute, principled and kind but didn’t suffer fools gladly! Nor was Tom all work and no play – he loved to have fun and he loved to socialise, travel and to dance.

No gathering was complete without his rendition of My Way. An avid reader and a strong advocate of lifelong education, much of his learning was self-taught.

Above all he believed in dignity and respect for all, and on securing good terms and conditions for all workers. Tom spent a very significant portion of his life promoting the causes of workers, regularly holding Saturday morning clinics at his home in Ballyfermot where he would advise, write letters, and offer to advocate for people who required assistance.

The trade union movement will be the poorer for his passing. We salute our comrade and we extend our sincere condolences to his family. Tom will be sadly missed by his brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews and his large circle of friends. May he rest in peace.