

The Tuam Martyrs – tragedy of Civil War

■ Story of six Republicans executed in Tuam – 100 years ago this week

One hundred years ago, Ireland was embroiled in Civil War – and this week marks the centenary of one of the darkest days of that conflict; the execution of six Republican prisoners in Galway, half a dozen men who were to become known as the Tuam Martyrs. Here historian **WILLIAM HENRY** recounts their story and the background to their killings.

THE Civil War that erupted after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty caused terrible bloodshed across Ireland between the 'Irregular' (Anti-Treaty) forces and the National Army.

The Four Courts in Dublin was occupied by the Irregulars as their headquarters. In June 1922, the National Army attacked the headquarters and forced them to surrender, but this action sparked an all-out Civil War.

By September, the conventional war phased out and the Irregular leadership changed the fighting strategy and reverted to the guerrilla tactics used against the British.

There were many violent attacks occurring across the country and the National Army could never be sure where the next ambush would take place. Many of them felt that stronger measures were needed to try and control the situation.

On 27 September 1922, General Richard Mulcahy requested special emergency powers from the Dáil to combat Irregular attacks.

This resulted in a Bill being passed giving military courts the power to hand down death sentences for the illegal possession of firearms.

The death sentences would have to be counter-signed by two members of the Dáil. Kevin O'Higgins was one of the signatories and his name appeared on seventy-seven death sentences.

A two-week warning was given along with an amnesty to anyone wishing to hand over weapons to the National Army. An official notice was then issued on 12 October 1922 that military courts would begin on the 15th of that month. The anti-Treaty forces referred to the new legislation

as the 'Murder Bill'.

On 17 November 1922 the first executions took place and continued for the duration of the war causing many senseless deaths. The seemingly random countryside executions were once described as a 'reign of arbitrary military terror'.

One of the worst tragedies occurred when six republican prisoners were executed in Tuam by the Free State in April 1923. It caused widespread shock throughout Ireland, particularly in the West.

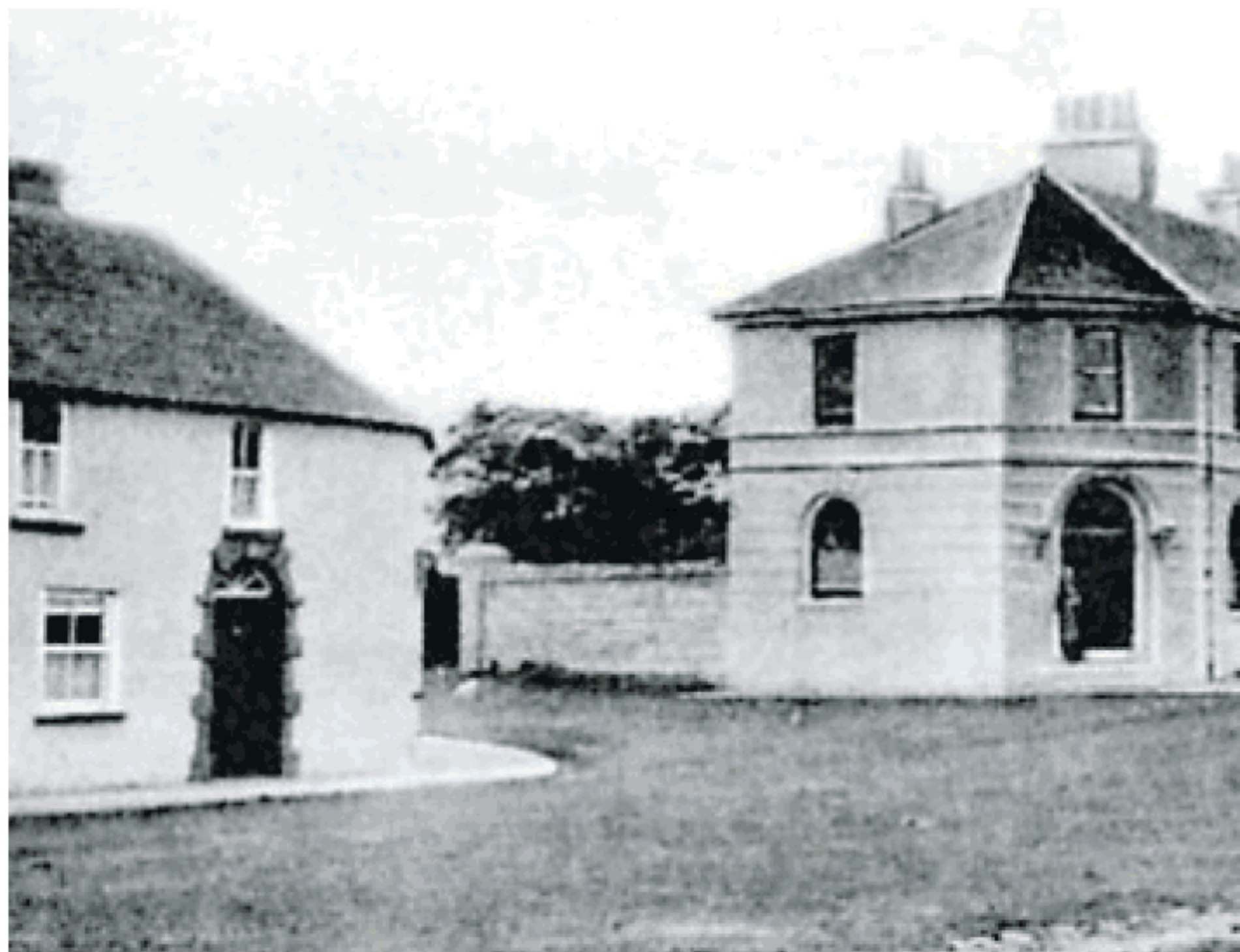
One could say the lead-up to this tragedy began in March 1923, when a meeting of anti-Treaty officers from the Western areas was held in Roscommon. They were each told to select one target to attack.

The war was in reality drawing to a close and this would be one last effort against the National Army. It seems that 'war weariness' was setting in among the Irregulars by this period as some commanders chose not to act.

The war against the British had been different; there was a sense of pride and enthusiasm in mounting such attacks. The civil war was certainly different and some mentioned that the appetite for conflict was declining. However, this was not the case for the 2nd Western Irregular Division, they selected Headford as their place of attack.

The National Army were stationed in a building; formally the National Bank in Headford.

On Sunday 8 April 1923, the Irregulars took up positions on the opposite side of the road, some in Thady McHugh's shop/pub. The attack began when a number of them crossed the road and placed a landmine at the



The Execution Wall, Tuam...Tom Small and Tom Joe Furey visited the site of the execution in 2002; both of their families took the Republican side during the Civil War.

bull-wire entanglements in front of the heavily fortified building. The plan was to blow up the outside wall.

However, the explosion only destroyed the front door and shattered the stone steps and windows. A desperate gun-battle followed between the two sides during which there were a number of casualties.

There was a second attempt by the Irregulars, but this was prevented by the sudden rush of military from the building. The army officers included Captain Joseph Nugent; and Sergeant-Major McCarthy, armed with a machine-gun.

During the following gun battle, McCarthy was mortally wounded and

later died in hospital. The Irregulars were eventually forced to retreat and the attack turned into a running gun-battle, during which another National Army soldier was killed.

The army continued to pursue the Irregulars and four soldiers were wounded, but not seriously.

One of the Irregulars was killed and another seriously wounded. However, some of the attackers got away across the River Corrib in boats, having come over from Connemara the night before.

The attack in Headford had serious consequences for six anti-Treaty prisoners being held in Galway Jail. They had been in jail for about two months

after being captured at Cluid in the Cahermorris / Currandulla area during a National Army raid in February 1923.

It was a large raid during which seventeen prisoners were taken along with a large quantity of arms including bombs, rifles, landmines and uniforms. The men were tried and found guilty of having arms in their possession and sentenced to death.

The six men were James O'Malley or Seamus Ó Maille (Oughterard); Frank Cunnane (Kilcoona, Headford); John Newell (Winefort, Headford); John McGuire (Cross, Cong); Michael Monaghan (Clooneen, Headford); Martin Moylan (Farmerstown, An-