

LARKIN AND THE D.M.P.

The Lock-Out of 1913

by

Gregory Allen

On the third and final night of the first production of "The Shadow of a Gunman", a young actor walked home with Sean O'Casey from the Abbey Theatre.

"We walked down Abbey Street into Store Street", Gabriel Fallon recalled in The Sunday Independent last week, March 30th; "passing the police station that figured so brutally in the Lock-Out of 1913".

In the revolt of the workers in 1913, the inevitable cry of police brutality was raised many times; yet, as always in times of social conflict, the police were more sinned against than sinning.

Gregory Allen,
193, Upper Kilmacud road,
Blackrock,
County Dublin.

31.3.1980

CASUALTIES OF PEACE

Larkin and the Dublin Metropolitan Police

by

Gregory Allen

In the revolt of the workers in 1913, James Larkin was confronted in the heartland of the conflict, Liberty Hall, Sackville Street, the North Wall, by Superintendent Fergus Quinn of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, C-Division, with headquarters in Store Street.

At the great demonstration in Beresford Place on August 26th, the day he called out the tramwaymen, Larkin boasted of the rise of "a labourer's son" to the leadership of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. The policeman was "a tool of the government". But Quinn, a native of Elphin, Co. Roscommon, had started life as a labourer himself, and joined the DMP as a £1-a-week constable in 1881. A self-made man, he rose from the ranks to become assistant-commissioner, matching the achievement of John Mallon, the great detective who solved the Phoenix Park Murders.

Like Mallon before him, Quinn was an Irish Nationalist; "a devout Catholic Nationalist and a man of peace", as the late District-Justice Michael Lennon described him in reminiscences published in 1949. In 1920 Dublin Castle, suspecting his Nationalist sympathies forced his resignation. All his years of loyal service were set aside. The Inspector-General of the RIC, Brigadier-Gen. Sir J.A.Byrne, another Catholic had already been forced out, and the same fate was also shared by Supt.Owen Brien of the G-Division, DMP, and Inspector Daniel Barrett, B-Division, both Catholics, whose loyalty had also apparently been called into question on account of their religion.

In 1913, Quinn and his men were caught in the crossfire between

the workers and their arch-enemy, the employers' leader, William Martin Murphy. As his diary shows, Quinn was at his desk early in the morning, seven days a week. There were daily conferences in Dublin Castle in the forenoon. He inspected his men on duty at the strike-bound premises, and supervised the nightly demonstrations of the striking workmen who became increasingly desperate as the months passed without hope of settlement. He was in the thick of the riots, he remained on duty with his men long after the streets were cleared, and was seldom in bed before one o'clock in the morning.

The Viceregal Commission which investigated the "disturbances" listed 30 strikes between January and mid-August. When Larkin overreached himself in calling out the tramwaymen on August 26th - less than half the men answered the strike call and the tram service was not seriously disrupted - a state of near-anarchy resulted in no less than 15 riots in a period of three weeks, August 30th to September 21st.

"Speeches containing direct incitement to violence were delivered at meetings of workingmen", the Commission reported in February, 1914; "and in many of these speeches, especially those delivered in the month of August, attacks were made upon the police." Some of the riots actually "had their origin in organised attacks on the police... The worst element was supplied by... cornerboys and the criminal class in the city".

The objective analysis of the Viceregal Commission represented, in the opinion of Larkin's biographer, his namesake, Emmet Larkin, "a complete whitewash of the police". The inevitable cry of police brutality was raised many times; yet, as always in times of social conflict, the police were more sinned against than sinning.

In one of the worst of the riots, in Great Brunswick Street on Saturday night, August 30th, before the scenes in Sackville Street the following day provided some grounds for the cry of his claim of provocation, an impeccable witness, Father Michael Curran, Archbishop's House, observed the "very severe mauling" of half-a-dozen constables protecting trams.

The police "behaved with singular self-restraint and in some cases with actual good humour. There was an absence of violence on their part, except... when they only employed such force as was necessary to secure and retain their prisoners. Their behaviour was the only redeeming feature of what was for a Dublin citizen a really humiliating and disgusting spectacle".

In High Street on Sunday night, August 31st a mob 600 strong cornered two DMP men who were rescued by another priest, Father Reilly. As they barricaded themselves in the presbytery, the windows were shattered by a hail of stones and bottles.

"Unless the (police) officers in charge were prepared to abandon possession of the streets to the rioters, they had no alternative but to give orders to clear the various streets," the Commission reported to the government.

On August 1st that year, Supt. Quinn took his leave ~~and went abroad,~~ possibly on a cycling holiday in Britain: he was an enthusiastic member of the DMP Cycling Club. On August 18th, a telegram summoned him back to duty in the troubled city. He noted in his diary: "Returned by night mail, arriving in Dublin by 5 a.m. having been wired to return at once to take charge of Division owing to pending strike." On August 21st, he himself "wired to Police Constables on Commissioner's leave to return off leave at once".

By May 26th, Larkin had won control of the docks having first defeated the City of Dublin Steamship Company, holders of the government mail contract. In June the farmers of County Dublin, faced with the loss of the harvest, capitulated to the agricultural labourers.

In 1911, Larkin had failed to organise the employees of the Dublin United Tramways Company, but he was stronger now.

On July 19th Murphy called a midnight meeting to warn the tramwaymen to warn that he would fight Larkin; and on August 13th repeated the warning in an advertisement in the press. The DUTC had "no apprehension of any trouble with their employees but (were) prepared to meet any emergency".

The Commissioner of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, Sir John Ross of Bladensburg, and his assistant, David Harrel, had been alerted by rumour of a strike by tramwaymen, planned for Horse Show week. On August 19th, Quinn attended a conference in Harrel's office "to make arrangements with other Superintendents about strikes in the city".

As Quinn was resuming duty that morning, Murphy closed down the Irish Independent despatch department to forestall a strike. The following day, the newspaper distributor, Eason refused a union demand to black the Independent, and his staff went on strike. On Thursday, Quinn recorded another blow to Larkin. "Employees of the Parcel Department, Tramway Company, notified by Mr. Walsh Supt. that their services were no longer required and about 120 were discharged."

These men were each handed a notice: "If you are not a member of the Union when the (parcels) traffic is resumed, your application for employment will be favourably considered."

On August 22nd, a number of ex-constables were sworn in for duty as gaolers in Store Street and Fitzgibbon Street stations. On the evidence of the diary, the police in the C-Division enjoyed two relatively quiet days on Sunday and Monday. And then, on August 26th, the Tuesday of Horse Show week, Larkin miscalculating his strength, called out the tramwaymen. Those who responded, and less than half the men were members of the union, entered the fray dramatically, abandoning the tramcars in the streets at 9.40 a.m. as the early crowds were making their way to the showgrounds at Ballsbridge.

At a monster meeting in Beresford Place that night, Larkin was at his fiery best. "Murphy has boasted that he will beat Larkin... a man who is going to lead you out of bondage into the land of promise." He had forced their enemy "to bow at the knee of a labourer's son." At that great meeting on August 26th, Larkin hurled the inevitable cry of "police brutality"; but he also had a word of advice for the stoic constables on duty.

If they "were worth their salt" they would demand their rights. In 1913, the DMP worked on average 8 hours, seven days a week, with night duty every second month. A constable had ten days, a sergeant 21 days annual leave. Top pay for a constable was 30/- a week, 38/1 for sergeants, at a time when artisans in the building trade were getting up to 36/-, unskilled labourers 18/- for a 6-day week.

Larkin scoffed at them. "If I was doing dirty work, I would expect dirty pay. The men who are keeping the peace are getting bad hours and meagre pay".

In his diary for Saturday August 23rd, Supt. Quinn had recorded a visit to Liberty Hall to warn Larkin that the "police could not allow (a) procession to pass by places affected by strike"; and that night the marching strikers were routed away from Sackville Street.

Now Larkin invoked the example of Carson and the Ulster Volunteers. "If they have the right to arm, the workingmen have an equal right to arm." They would demonstrate in Sackville Street, he shouted defiantly. "It is our street as well as William Martin Murphy's... we are fighting for bread and butter and we will hold our meetings in the streets... By the living God, if they want war they can have it,"

The authorities could hardly ignore the threat. At 2.10 p.m. the next day, Quinn returned to Liberty Hall, as the diary records: "Warned James Larkin that no procession of any kind would be allowed through any of the streets of the city... and if such were attempted, it would be stopped by force." The policeman soberly recorded what must have been a heated rejoinder. "(Larkin) said he would not be stopped by force, that police would have to accept the responsibility and that he would at once make it known in the press and to all Dublin".

Larkin made good his threat, announcing in Beresford Place that night a meeting in Sackville Street to take place on Sunday, adding grimly that women and children were to stay away.

The rally on August 26th was also addressed in wild language by William O'Brien, President of the Tailors' Society, Thomas Lawlor and William Partridge, who were all arrested with Larkin on Thursday morning. Released on bail, Larkin threw down the gauntlet: he would be in Sackville Street on Sunday, "dead or alive". The government, predictably, proclaimed the threatened demonstration as "an unlawful assembly".

On Friday the 29th at 7.15 p.m., Quinn served notice of the Proclamation on Larkin at Liberty Hall. His laconic entry for this date conveys nothing of the ensuing drama in Beresford Place. "In charge of police from 7.30 p.m.... Engaged at meeting outside Liberty Hall from 8 p.m."

A crowd of 10,000 turned up to hear James Connolly speak, and to cheer Larkin as he burned the Proclamation. "If they are going to stop the meeting at the dictation of William Martin Murphy, then I say that for every one of our men that falls, two must fall on the other side... You have every right to hold the meetings; but you have been too supine and cowardly in the past... If the Belfast Orangemen can hold a meeting, I do not see what is the matter that Dublin labourers can't hold a meeting, and if they want a revolution there that day, there will be a revolution".

On Saturday morning, Quinn "went to Police courts and obtained warrants for arrest of James Larkin, James Connolly and W.P. Partridge". In his biography, Emmet Larkin recalls that O'Brien hurried to Liberty Hall to warn Larkin, who succeeded in evading arrest.

To prevent the meeting on Sunday, a massive force of over 300 police augmented by members of the RIC Reserve Force was deployed

in Sackville Street. At 12.40 p.m. Supt. Quinn and a force of 40 constables were withdrawn to supervise a meeting at Croydon Park in Fairview. The duty of arresting Larkin fell instead to the lot of Supt. Lawrence Murphy of the A-Division, Kevin Street, and Supt. Cornelius Kiernan, E-Division, Donnybrook. They were close to the Imperial Hotel when Larkin made his dramatic appearance on the balcony at 1.25 p.m., disguised as an old man, with false beard, and a long dress coat belonging to Count Markievicz.

The trouble started when stones were thrown by a section of the crowd. The battle-weary police retaliated with a baton charge, the crowd fleeing into Prince's Street where they were met head-on by another police detachment on duty at the rear of the Independent offices. The troublemakers scattered, mingling with innocent people coming from last Mass in the pro-Cathedral, and all bore the brunt of the DMP onslaught.

It was all over in two minutes, with the reputation of the DMP in ruins amid the debris in Sackville street, business premises and tramcars wrecked; 400 injured citizens including women and children, and 50 policemen, on their way to the hospitals.

But who was really to blame for this debacle; organised labour fighting for justice, or the employers victims themselves of inherited anti-social attitudes? Thrust by society into no-man's land the police were the prime casualties of peace. The Vice-regal Commission offered a definitive judgement to history. The police had discharged their duties "with conspicuous courage and patience. They were exposed to great dangers and treated with great brutality, and in many instances... though suffering

from injuries which would have fully justified their absence from duty, they remained at their posts under great difficulties until peace had been restored. The total number of constables injured during these riots exceeded 200."

*Based on the official diary of Supt. Fergus Quinn, D.M.P., period 1913-'15; in the State Paper Office.