

MURDER 1923 IN MOHILL



On 18 March 1923, in the final months of the Civil War, Dr Paddy Muldoon was shot and killed at Bridge Street, Mohill.

Three men and a priest were implicated in the murder. In the aftermath, it was clear that the IRA, church and major figures in the new state all colluded in some way to cover up the killing.



One hundred years later, on 18 March 2023, *Mohill & District Historical & Heritage Society* traced Dr Muldoon's final footsteps through a public walk, short film, talks and music.



Bridge Street and Mohill Courthouse, 1889
Photograph by Leland Duncan Lewis © Irish Picture Library, Davison & Associates

MOHILL  MAOTHAIL
DECADE OF CENTENARIES



Paddy and Rita Muldoon,
courtesy of Muldoon/Donnelly family



Fr Edward Ryans
courtesy of family



John Charles Keegan (right) with Éamon
de Valera, from a photograph taken in
Arbour Hill Prison, 1924. Mercier
Archives, reprinted with permission.

The murder of Dr Paddy Muldoon

By 1923, 31 year old Paddy Muldoon had been a doctor in Mohill for five years. He had gained respect locally for his handling of the 1918 pandemic, and had supported the movement for independence. During the War of Independence he trained Cumann na mBan members in first aid; in the Civil War, he was on the new army's list of doctors but treated pro- and anti-Treaty combatants alike.

Before the murder

Both Paddy and his wife Rita were aware of the pregnancy of 19 year old Mary Kate Gallogly, housekeeper for 36 year old Fr Edward Ryans. Rita may have learned about it through her involvement with the Mohill Nursing Association. As the pregnancy developed, Ryans fumed about the Muldoons' stance on it. There was speculation that Dr Muldoon refused to terminate the pregnancy, and had urged the priest to 'do the right thing'. Ryans blamed Muldoon for telling Canon Masterson that Ryans, was the father.

In January, Ryans produced a revolver and made threats in the company of Paddy and Rita. On 13 February, two weeks after Mary Kate gave birth, she and Ryans were arrested in Dublin for attempting to abandon the baby. The baby, Rose, was sent to a home, where she died weeks later. In February - home after this arrest - Ryans swore vengeance on Rita for meddling in his affairs. On 20 February, Bishop Hoare ordered Ryans to vacate his parish.

18 March 1923

On Sunday night, 18 March, Muldoon played his usual game of cards with Canon Masterson and Edward Geelan at the parochial house. Shortly after 10:30pm, Muldoon and Geelan made their way down Main Street towards their homes on Station Road and Hill Street.

As they said goodnight at the corner of Bridge Street, three men lay in wait. Muldoon was shot at close range by a gunman, said to be John Charles (Charlie) Keegan; a second gunman, alleged to be Willie Cassells, fired from the courthouse. Three men were seen running from the scene, down Station Road.

As Muldoon lay wounded on the road, Geelan roused Thomas McManus who lived nearby. McManus' teenage son went for Dr Redahan and the curate, Fr Clancy. Muldoon died on the steps of the courthouse after receiving last rites. He had been killed by a single bullet wound under the right clavicle. He was carried home on a door, and laid out in his surgery at Coolabawn House where he remained during the inquest and until his funeral on 21 March.

Aftermath

Paddy Muldoon was survived by Rita and their four children, one yet unborn. Rita persistently challenged the authorities and sought justice for her husband. In May 1924 she rebutted an IRA statement calling her husband's killing an 'unavoidable accident', but she was unable to overcome the powerful forces of the IRA, church and emerging state. All colluded to suppress the story and help the perpetrators evade justice. Nobody was charged with Dr Muldoon's murder.

The authorities acknowledged that Keegan was the lead gunman, and that Ryans was linked to the shooting and to Mary Kate's pregnancy. In 1924, Seán Lemass, then a senior IRA intelligence officer, was sent to review the situation. He reported that Ryans was 'undoubtedly guilty' of fathering the child, and that 'there are certainly grounds for suspecting him' of instigating Muldoon's murder.

Adapted largely from Ken Boyle & Tim Desmond, *The Murder of Dr Muldoon*, Mercier Press, 2019.

Ireland 1914-23

Dr Patrick McGarty opened the evening by describing the context and broad political forces at play in South Leitrim between 1914-23. This text is adapted from a recording of his talk.

Home Rule, rebellion and Sinn Féin

In 1914, across Ireland, the single political focus was on achieving Home Rule, a type of devolved government while remaining within the British empire. But World War I in 1914 changed everything, and divided Irish nationalists. John Redmond led a majority towards supporting the war, in the hope that it would help win Home Rule. The number of Mohill men who joined to fight in the war believed that in fighting against the German army, they were fighting for Home Rule for Ireland.

In 1916, a small group of Irish nationalists led a rebellion in Dublin which was quickly defeated. The executions of sixteen of the rebellion's leaders including Pádraig Pearse and Leitrim's Seán MacDiarmada, turned nationalists against Home Rule and against Britain. The years from 1916 to 1918 saw a massive transfer of allegiance from Home Rule towards independent republicanism. Sinn Féin swept the boards in the 1918 election, and the Irish Party led by John Redmond dissolved into oblivion.

War of Independence

The War of Independence lasted from 1919-21. In general, Leitrim was seen as one of the 'quiet counties'. Yet, republicans in South Leitrim led a highly effective campaign of boycott and intimidation against the crown, which Michael Collins lauded and encouraged. One of the most significant incidents of the war happened at Selton Hill near Gortvagh, where six men were killed by crown forces. It was the IRA's second largest loss of life in a single event in the war.

In July 1921 a truce was agreed, and between July and December attempts were made to negotiate a long-term settlement with Britain. The Anglo-Irish treaty was signed in December 1921, and after much debate, was ratified by a narrow majority in January 1922. It bitterly divided Irish nationalists, and pitted factions led by Éamon de Valera and Michael Collins against each other. Collins argued that the treaty was the best that could be achieved, and in fact the Treaty did deliver much more than Home Rule. Crown forces returned to Britain, and in Leitrim and across Ireland, the question was: are you pro-treaty or anti-treaty?

Civil War

The area around Mohill and South Leitrim sided with Collins, largely due to the influence of a key republican leaders including IRA Commandant General Seán Mac Eoin from neighbouring Ballinallee in Co. Longford. In a general election in 1922, the vast majority of the electorate voted pro-treaty. Nevertheless, divisions persisted amongst political activists, and Civil War broke out on 28 June 1922.

That summer there were massive advances by the forces of the Free State against the anti-treaty IRA. Mohill was relatively quiet. The Free State national army was barracked in St Patrick's house at the top of the town. There were reports of shootings around the town, and occasional burnings in the area, but most activity was centred around Boyle and Sligo, with the nearest major conflict being the battle for Boyle.

With Free State forces in control of the major towns, the anti-treaty IRA conducted a guerrilla war from the countryside and mountains. The main resistance in the region was on the north Sligo/north Leitrim border and around Arigna. In February 1923, the Free State forces engaged in a major offensive against the Arigna

column, following attacks by the column on Ballinamore and Ballyconnell. Two civilians were killed and shops were burned in Ballyconnell, while in Ballinamore, the column captured the thirty-five strong army garrison and took the men by train to Drumshanbo before releasing them. The Free State offensive led to the extra-judicial killings of two members of the anti-Treaty IRA in a mine at Arigna and the capture of many of the Arigna column including its leader Ned Bofin.

In total, twelve people in Leitrim died due to the civil war, six of whom were civilians.

Fr Ryans: president of Sinn Féin in Leitrim

One of the local republican leaders was Fr Edward Ryans, president of Sinn Féin in Leitrim from 1920 to 1922. Ryans was a curate in Aughavas and a close personal friend of Seán Mac Eoin, having worked with him successfully in 1917 to return Joe McGuinness as one of the first Sinn Féin members of parliament.

Ryans took the pro-treaty side for the first six months of the civil war, but then reversed his position, possibly due to pressure from his family who lived outside Arigna. He then became very active on the anti-treaty side.

On the night of the 18th March 1923 a party of men were tasked to go into Mohill village for the purpose of an ambushing a Free State patrol that was reported on that night (there were two F.S. patrols in Mohill at the time). After being in position for some time the men wearing trench coats approached and on being ordered to halt took to flight. The party, having come to the conclusion that they were F.S. officers in uniform, opened fire on them ^{killing} ~~murdering~~ one who, unfortunately, proved to be Dr Muldoon.

Excerpt: letter of 30 April 1924, from PÓB' (Prionchius/Frank Ó Beirne), Officer commanding 3rd Western Division, to the IRA Chief of Staff

2. 'I am satisfied that the statement is correct in every detail. Dr Muldoon and his companion were not in a motor car at the time of the occurrence.

3. Organisation in South Leitrim was very poor. This area originally belonged to Sean MacKewen but they carried off some operations including an attack on Mohill.

PÓB' OS

Letter 8 May 1924, from 'PÓB' to the Chief of Staff.

but from all accounts it is exceedingly difficult and complex. The one fact which emerges from of which I feel personally Ryan is a 'bad lot'. As he



drop altogether
telling him
of the first
ged on it
stant to

the first charge of which he is undoubtedly guilty and there are certainly grounds for suspecting him of the second. Anyhow an individual like him deserves scant consideration.

As I suggested above the best course would be to let the case drop and so obviate the difficulty of reconciling contradictory statements and untie a black knot. Otherwise the two courses open to hold over an inquiry until all the

Images from filming 'Murder in Mohill',
March 2023.



*Images from filming 'Murder in Mohill',
March 2023.*

Cast list

Joe Armstrong, Gerry Bohan, Jonathan Duffy,
Darren Duignan, Gerry Gilroy, Bridget Kilrane,
Ciara McDermott, Pádraig McLoughlin,
John Reynolds, George Taylor, Kim Taylor.

Production team

Fiona Slevin, Kim Taylor, David Wynne.
Film directed by David Wynne.

Background image opposite from report of 26 July 1924,
from Seán Lemass to IRA Chief of Staff;
UCD Archives, reprinted with permission.

Shocking Leitrim Tragedy.

Popular Mohill Doctor Shot Dead.

No Motive Known.

The Late Dr. Muldoon.

Loss to the Community.

A horrible tragedy occurred at Mohill on Sunday night last when Dr. Michael P. Muldoon was shot dead on the street. About 11 o'clock he and Mr. Edward Geelan, Clerk of the District Council, were going to their homes. At the lower end of the town, just beyond the bridge they were about to part company, the doctor to turn down towards the railway station, a short distance from his home, and Mr. Geelan to go on straight past the old courthouse for his.

The terrible occurrence has filled everybody in Mohill and South Leitrim with horror. To say that Dr. Muldoon was immensely popular would be but a poor and bare way indeed to express the feelings of affection and esteem in which he was held throughout South Leitrim, in the adjoining counties, and everywhere he was known. Although quite a young man, 31 years of age, he had in a few short years in Mohill built up an enormous practice, extending practically from near Ballinamore to the Longford district on the one hand, and into the counties of Cavan and Roscommon on the other, and he was practically continually on the road. He came to Mohill with a great reputation for medical skill, which was soon proved out by fact, but added to this there was that which was equally valuable, his great human qualities, his innate courtesy and kindness, his imperturbable affability and geniality, and a nature in which tone or airs or considerations of class distinction found absolutely no part. With him the poor were as much at home as the rich, the simple as the educated. Indeed he was veritably the poor man's friend, and what his death means to the poor of a very large area can only later on be estimated. At any hour, night or day, in storm or in sunshine, he was ready to start out on their call, and his attendance was not a mere cursory business, but he would stay on and do all that was possible at the time, and devote all possible attention to the case afterwards.

Mr. Edward Geelan, Clerk of District Council, Mohill, deposed—Last night, 18th March, I was coming down the town with Dr. Muldoon at about 11 o'clock. I walked with him as far as the bridge. I was parting with him at the bridge to go to my own house. As we were parting at the bridge a shot was fired into Dr. Muldoon's breast. I saw the person who fired the shot from a rifle; he was about two yards from Dr. Muldoon. We were both on the footpath at the time. No warning was given before the shot was fired. After the shot was fired Dr. Muldoon said "Don't shoot," and he jumped off the footpath and on to the road. I shouted, "Don't shoot; it is Dr. Muldoon." It was quite obvious they knew it was Dr. Muldoon was there. The man who fired the shot first turned on the footpath and fired at the doctor, who was on the centre of the road. Simultaneously another man who was standing near the courthouse fired in the direction of the doctor. The doctor then fell on his face on the road, about five yards from where he was standing when the first shot was fired. The doctor then said, "Edward, I'm shot." I saw three men then running in the direction of the railway station, and saw rifles with two of them. I then tried to lift the doctor but I was unable. He was unable to give me any assistance, and he was bleeding profusely. I raised the alarm as best I could and called Tom McManus. McManus and his son came out and assisted me to lift Dr. Muldoon to the courthouse steps. Tom McManus then went for the priest and doctor, and Rev. Father Clancy attended the doctor before he died. Dr. Rodahan was also in immediate attendance. I remained with him till he died.

The Coroner said after what Mr. Lynch had said there was very little left for him to say. They had heard Mr. Geelan's evidence of the affair. Personally he regretted the death of Dr. Muldoon. It was a calamity in the county, and he hoped the jury would add a rider expressing the sympathy of all to Mrs. Muldoon and family.

The jury returned a verdict that the deceased was murdered by some person or persons unknown.

From a report of Dr Muldoon's murder in the *Roscommon Herald*, 24 March 1923.

Reprinted with permission of Irish Newspaper Archives.

After Dr Muldoon's murder

After showing the film and unveiling a plaque to Dr Muldoon, Fiona Slevin led a conversation with Ken Boyle and Tim Desmond on the aftermath of the murder. This text is adapted from a recording of the conversation in Casey's pub.

Why was no-one arrested?

1923 was a very different time with different forces and powers at large in the country. The murder of Dr Muldoon was a tragedy for Rita Muldoon and her children, but was not unique in being unprosecuted. Rita spoke to IRA Commandant General Seán Mac Eoin about the case, but the state did not move against Ryans. Given the evidence against Fr Ryans, it is highly likely that Ryans would have been convicted on the circumstantial evidence that pointed to him as the instigator of the murder.

The abandonment charge was harder to avoid: the Dublin women were strong witnesses, and the facts of the case were irrefutable. Ryans was charged with abandonment and spent the year in prison. The case went to trial three times, but the jury failed to reach a verdict each time.

Mary Kate Gallogly

Mary Kate Gallogly was detained – effectively kidnapped – on the morning of the first abandonment case. But it didn't proceed and the case against her was dropped without explanation. She was sent to a women's detention centre in Athlone. She shared a cell with a Cumann na mBan detainee whose letters describe Mary Kate as a vulnerable and traumatised young girl. At the third case, the prosecutor described Mary Kate as being in an asylum. Mary Kate was clearly affected by the case. After her release, she went to the United States but came back to Ireland, married and had four sons. By 1967, she was a widow and living with the youngest son, and the two joined the rest of the family in Australia where she lived for the rest of her life.

Rita Muldoon

Rita Muldoon's bravery is striking. In an era where the wounds of the Civil War were wide open and powerful forces pushed for silence, Rita stood up for her husband's reputation and for truth. In 1924, the IRA published a report claiming the murder was a mistake, and that the shooters, seeing Muldoon and Geelan run away in trench-coats, assumed they were Free State soldiers and took fire. Rita published a letter in several newspapers strongly repudiating the statement, stating that the evening was mild, and Dr Muldoon was wearing a light grey lounge suit. But ultimately, Rita was defeated by a system in which state, church and IRA colluded and covered up the murder. The murder happened under the cloak of a conflict that had nothing to do with it.

Thomas William Muldoon

Dr Muldoon's nephew, Thomas William Muldoon, became obsessed at the injustice done to his uncle and spent his life seeking answers and retribution. He confronted Ryans at his church in England, and distributed leaflets in the church and near Ryans home.

What happened the shooters?

Patrick McGarty took up the story.

The shooters did not stop at the murder of Dr Muldoon. The next day, 19 March, the same group was allegedly involved in the shooting in Ballinamuck of an unarmed Free State soldier, Edward Fitzgerald from Mohill. They were also allegedly involved in the burning of Free State officer Eugene Kilkenny's house, and in attempted killings around Bornacoola and Cloone. They were implicated in two other murders, including the killing of former Free State officer Patrick Keville on 25 May – a day after Frank Aiken, leader of the Anti-Treaty IRA, ordered arms to be put down, thus ending the Irish Civil War.



Dr Patrick McGarty opens the evening,
outside St Patrick's church in Mohill



Kim Taylor with Malcolm Donnelly, grandson of
Dr Muldoon, who unveiled a plaque on the spot
where the murder happened



Tim Desmond and Ken Boyle in
conversation with Fiona Slevin while
David Wynne records



Huge crowd waiting to watch the film at Hill Street

Post-script

After the conversation with Ken Boyle and Tim Desmond, there were two contributions, one from local man John Reynolds, the other from Tom Henry of Fr Ryans' family.

Tom Henry

Tom Henry, a member of the extended Ryans family, told how his family had only recently heard the story of Dr Muldoon's murder, and were shocked and horrified to hear of the connection to their family.

Although Tom never met Fr Ryans, he knew of Ryans' connection to the IRA but thought he had been excommunicated for his IRA activities, and there had been a code of silence over the Muldoon story. He told how Ryans had lived in Blackpool where he was allowed to say mass, but only on a side altar, and without a congregation present. Ryans, he said, died in 1964 in a Lancashire mental asylum.

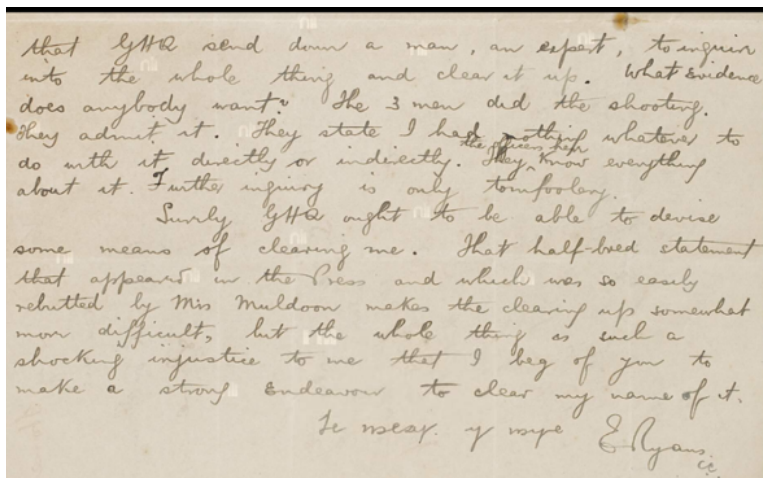
Tom offered, from one family to another, their very deep apologies to the Muldoon family for what Ryans had put them through, acknowledging the hurt and trauma that had rippled down generations.

John Reynolds

The story of John Charlie Keegan was still alive decades after the murder. Sometime in the early 1960s, a rumour spread that Keegan was coming back from America and would be at a local carnival or summer dance in Cornageehea, near Keegan's homeplace. The word was that Keegan would be fully armed and a number of scores would be settled, and that there would be men there to shoot him. Keegan did turn up but he wasn't shot.

The story enhanced his image as a sort of folk hero. He was seen, and liked to see himself, as a Jesse Jones or Wyatt Earp type character. He had long blond hair and wore a frock coat. In reality, he was a fairly miserable looking character, not a big man, with sallow skin that had dried out after years in the American sun.

He had been on the run at 17, and from then took on the role of the gunman and outlaw hero. He was known for taking credit for killings he didn't do, but did enough to justify his reputation. Keegan died in 1977, aged 77.



that GHA send down a man, an expert, to inquire into the whole thing and clear it up. What evidence does anybody want? The 3 men did the shooting. They admit it. They state I had nothing whatever to do with it directly or indirectly. They know everything about it. Further inquiry is only tomfoolery. Surely GHA ought to be able to devise some means of clearing me. That half-bred statement that appears in the Press and which was so easily rebutted by Mrs Muldoon makes the clearing up somewhat more difficult, but the whole thing is such a shocking injustice to me that I beg of you to make a strong endeavour to clear my name of it. In reply. Y mays E. Ryans.

Excerpt: letter dated 18 June 1924 from Fr Ryans to the IRA Chief of Staff.

National Library of Ireland, reprinted with permission.

For more information on the murder of Dr Muldoon

Ken Boyle & Tim Desmond, *The Murder of Dr Muldoon*, Mercier Press, 2019.

An Unholy Trinity, RTÉ Radio Documentary on One, by Tim Desmond with additional research by Ken Boyle.

Read about the event,
view the film,
add your story



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Paddy and Rita Muldoon,
courtesy of Muldoon/Donnelly family



Leitrim
County Council
Comhairle Chontae Liatroma



An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir,
Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán
Department of Tourism, Culture,
Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media



An Ciste um Athghiniúint
agus Forbairt Tuaithe
Rural Regeneration and
Development Fund

