

Constable Jeremiah Mee is famed in the annals of Irish history for being the spokesman for a group of RIC men in Listol who stood up to their divisional commissioner, Colonel Smyth, during the War of Independence and refused to accept his policy of shooting any 'suspicious-looking' Irishman on sight.

This unique record, based on Mee's memoirs, presents a first-hand account of life in the RIC from 1910 to 1920. It shows the changing relationship between the Irish people and the members of the force, gives a valuable insight into the changing attitudes of many RIC men during the War of Independence and includes a comprehensive account of the 1920 Listol riot and its aftermath. It also provides an account of Mee's work for the First Dáil's department of labour, where he worked before leaving the RIC, and his involvement in the Belfast Boycott.



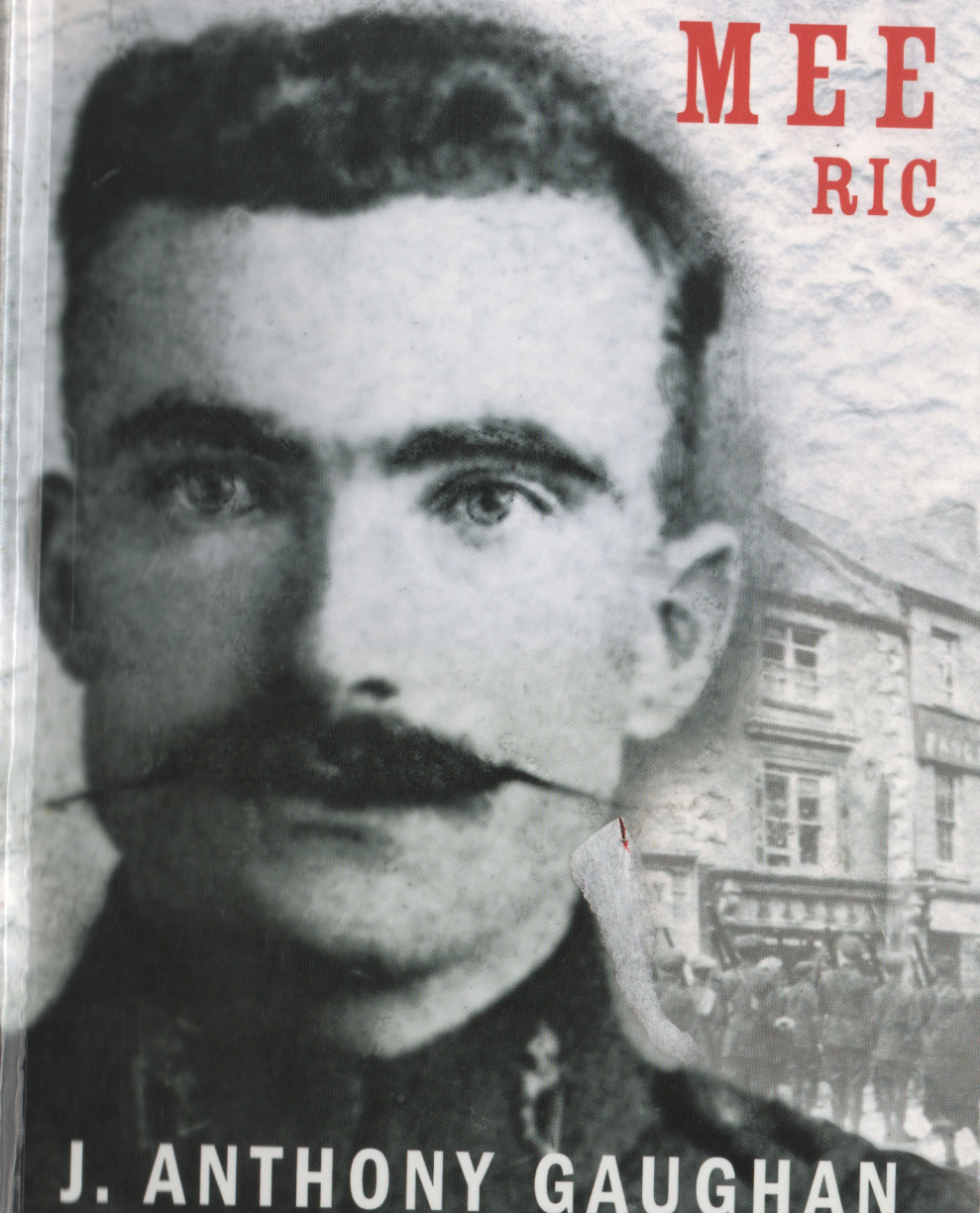
THE MEMOIRS OF CONSTABLE  
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# THE MEMOIRS OF CONSTABLE JEREMIAH MEE RIC



J. ANTHONY GAUGHAN

## I DO THE TILLAGE CENSUS

The tillage census was made by the police in June each year. Two policemen were assigned to the job in each district and the whole month was given to it. Every house had to be visited, the stock counted and full details of tillage, grazing land, wasteland and shrubbery recorded. When done properly it was hard and laborious work.

I, being the newest arrival in the district, was selected by the sergeant on the grounds that the compilation of the tillage census would enable me to acquire a knowledge of the district. After lots were drawn, Browne was also appointed. He and I then conferred as to the best method of 'working the area'. The first day was devoted to the consulting of old records which Browne had, and which would act as a guide to our operations.

Browne, as already mentioned, was sixteen stone and to quote his own axiom he 'believed in doing the maximum amount of work with the minimum of labour'. He was a splendid penman, was extra good at figures and on more than one occasion had been complimented for the way in which he had furnished the tillage returns. Sitting on the dayroom form and smoking a big crooked pipe he confided in me as follows: 'Young fellow, the first requirement of a good policeman is brains, and only you have brains you would not be here. Therefore, use your brains while you're on the tillage and don't start doing the idiot, looking into mouse holes! Take the case of fowl. I'll guarantee there are not half-a-dozen women in the whole district who can tell you off-hand how many hens they have, and do you mean to tell me that they are going out to count them for you? Even if they tried they could not count them at this time of year with half of them clucking on the hedges and ditches. In order to get shut of you they'll give you a number at random. You may please yourself whether you accept that number or give your own estimate. Of one thing I must caution you, don't accept or enter any figures that do not end in 0 or 5. Any other figures are awkward for totting and anyway a few hens here or there do not make the slightest difference. Suppose for instance that a woman tells you that she has twenty-seven hens, you may take it from me that two of

them will be killed or have died from disease by the time you have your forms completed, which means that the correct number would, in any case, be twenty-five. You know what I mean. The same applies in the case of tillage. Suppose that a man had two acres of tillage last year, do you mean to tell me that he will have three acres this year? Not likely. There again you have to use your brains and see that he has the same this year that he had last year. Occasionally you may add on or take off half an acre for appearance sake. Avoid quarter acres for the same reason that you avoid the odd hens. Be careful to get the number of horses correct as a separate list of these has to be kept in case of war. When you come across a decent man he will be able to give you particulars of his neighbour's tillage much better than the farmer himself, so don't be doing the idiot by visiting every farm.'

With this advice fresh in my mind I set off on my bicycle. I carried a haversack which contained the tillage books and my lunch. I made up my mind to ignore most of Browne's instructions, to visit every house and attempt to make an honest return. This I did for the first few days, at the end of which time I was convinced that it would take three months and not one to complete the returns. Practically every farmer was out working in the fields, while his wife and family were busily engaged in household duties and had little time to answer all my questions. When I made too many enquiries they would remark: 'You must be the new man.'

I soon realised the value of Browne's advice, I adopted his method and acquired the art of doing the 'maximum amount of work with the minimum amount of labour'. It had the advantage of giving me more time to get to know the people with whom I made many friends, especially among the young ladies. Only twice did I carry my lunch in the haversack and even on those two occasions I was offered at least four dinners by those sociable people.

Long before the end of the month Browne and myself completed the returns. In due course a Blue Book was issued by the Department of Agriculture showing the tillage returns for Ireland and one could only smile at such round figures as 'Total number of hens: 7,000,000'!

uneasy peace, and the evidence of approaching turmoil was there for those who could read the signs.

In England Labour was on the march and strikes were the order of the day in the industrial areas. Strike-breakers, then known as 'scab labour', were employed by the industrialists in a desperate effort to beat the trade unions. Strike-breakers received double the pay of the ordinary labourer and were recruited from the slums of the industrial cities.

James Larkin<sup>8</sup> made his appearance on the Irish scene and, taking the lead from British Labour, organised strikes throughout the country, including the Sligo dock strike of 1913 which lasted for eight weeks.<sup>9</sup> In that year also there was a 'revolution' within the RIC when they received permission to wear toe-cap boots as part of their uniform. This concession came after an agitation lasting over ten years.

Within the police force there was considerable discontent because of their small pay. Discipline alone prevented them from joining the ranks of Labour in the struggle for better conditions. Schoolteachers were in a similar position and they did throw in their lot with Labour.

A Liberal government held office in England on the strength of the Irish Party vote. A strong Conservative opposition was prepared to use every means to oust the Liberal Party. The Prime Minister, Mr Asquith, held the Irish Party vote on the promise of Home Rule while Sir Edward Carson, backed by the Conservatives, opposed Home Rule tooth and nail.<sup>10</sup>

In the North of Ireland members of Orange Lodges, complete with wooden guns, drilled and paraded in the streets, especially in Belfast. At the end of 1912 their total strength was estimated at 100,000.

Apart from these groups and keenly on the alert were the American-based Clan na Gael and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). Members of these organisations made no speeches and carried neither banner nor ribbon. They had lost faith in British promises and believed in action rather than flag-waving. They were the advance guard of Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army.

### KEEPING AN EYE ON 'RETURNED YANKS'

One of the duties of the RIC was to be on the alert for information concerning the IRB and Clan na Gael.<sup>11</sup> Since these were secret organisations we knew nothing whatsoever about them and even when we did receive scraps of information about their activities we did not pass the information on to the authorities, as the tenuous nature of the intelligence would have entailed the writing of endless and vague reports. The authorities probably realised this and about 1911 a directive was issued to all barracks that Irish-Americans on visits to their homeland were to be kept under surveillance and that weekly reports on their movements were to be forwarded to Dublin Castle. At Kesh this aspect of our police-duties gave us an opportunity to mix business with pleasure. After a week at home the average 'returned Yank' would be at a loss for company during the middle of the day, as members of his family would be engaged in household work or on the land. He would then make for one of the local pubs to find himself company. There one of us would contrive to meet him. Generally the visitor and the policeman deputed 'to look after him' would become fast friends and thereafter the visitor would sometimes spend as much of his time in the police barracks, chatting with us, as down in one of the local pubs. In the meantime, innocuous police reports concerning the movements of the visitor would be forwarded each week, under sealed cover, to Dublin Castle. These weekly reports were written by the sergeant. As with his entries in the patrol book, in writing these reports he showed how well he understood the 'official mind'. In every report he mentioned the two organisations whom he knew the authorities were most interested in, and for good measure described all the people who came in contact with the subject of the report as either belonging or not belonging to the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH).

Occasionally the district inspector would note in the official book the absence of prosecutions, after which we would keep an eye out for animals wandering on the roads and would bring the owners to justice. Summonses would be issued and the defendants brought to Ballymote court before a bench of five or six magistrates. In each county there

was at least one resident magistrate who was appointed to the post not because he had any special qualifications but because he was a man of influence with the government. This important personage attended the court only when there was an unusual case for hearing. In his absence, the senior magistrate would act as chairman of the court and neither he nor the other magistrates would have an extensive knowledge of the law.<sup>12</sup> Their decisions, on the whole, were reasonable and fair, based as they were on common sense rather than on acts of parliament.

Having stated in great detail the charge of allowing the animals to wander on the public road, the policeman would withdraw and the defendant would go into the witness box to take the solemn oath and give his evidence. Rarely was it known for a defendant to dispute the evidence given by a policeman. The usual defence in a case of this kind would be: 'Your worship, I was very busy cutting corn in the field when my little girl came up with my tea. She must have left the gate open and the cattle got out. They could not be more than a few minutes there when the policeman came along and found them on the road.' Here the constable would be recalled and he would verify that this was the defendant's first offence and that the defendant was a decent, hardworking man. After much craning of necks by the bench of magistrates the defendant would get a lecture on the seriousness of the offence and would get off under the First Offenders Act or be fined at most only half-a-crown (12½p). There was never any bad feeling between the police and the defendants over these prosecutions. It was understood, of course, that an occasional prosecution was necessary in order to justify the existence of the force, and there the matter ended. Indeed, it was not unusual to see the policeman travelling to Ballymote on the defendant's sidecar and returning on the same car with the week's groceries for the barracks.

#### \*THE PEOPLE OF KESH

A good local knowledge was considered an essential qualification for a good policeman. After two and a half years in Kesh I must therefore have been one of the best policemen in Ireland. Not alone did I know

every townland from Battlefield to Carrowmacelnanny and from Carrowcroy to Carrownacreevy, but I knew every house in the district and the people who lived in it. In my cycling tours I became familiar with the beauty spots around Lough Arrow, Lough Key and Lough Gara. These three lakes are convenient to the town of Boyle and, viewed from the Curlew mountains, present a scene equalled only by the lakes of Killarney.

It was, therefore, with a heavy heart that I received the news of my transfer from Kesh to Collooney in August 1913. In my two and a half years at Kesh I had practically forgotten that I was a policeman and I had learned much that many policemen miss. It was true that our sergeant had broken every regulation of the police code but he substituted instead the finest code of all, a Christian outlook towards his fellow man. In the barracks all were treated as equals and this created a wonderful atmosphere.

During those years not one prisoner had entered our lock-up and that at a time when intoxicating drink was within the reach of all. Being the driver of an unlighted vehicle at night or the owner of a cow which wandered on the public road were the only crimes which occurred in the area. This surely was a good record and speaks volumes for the people of that district.

I can recall vividly my transfer in August 1913. I can see myself sitting on the old sidecar, with all my worldly goods packed in its well. At the little barracks gate stand the sergeant and his three men wishing me Godspeed, while the sergeant wipes his nose with a large red handkerchief. At the barracks door stands the old barracks servant wiping her eyes with her apron which she holds with her two hands, as she makes a mental note of another very decent man who cried when he left Kesh.