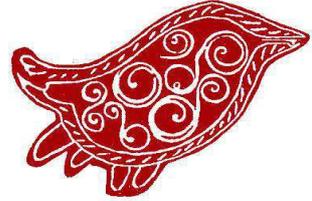


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'Fight on to the Last Man': A letter to Liam Lynch, March 1923

Irish archives, for rather obvious reasons, do not contain a huge amount of correspondence to leading IRA participants in the civil war of 1922-23. Consequently, any additional material is to be welcomed, but especially so when it is a letter (Ill. 1) to the IRA chief-of-staff, Liam Lynch, from a younger brother, written as the conflict was nearing its conclusion. This is what was re-discovered some years ago by Pa Barry of Conna, a member of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society, and recently brought to my attention by Jim Lane.

It seems that the letter was originally in the possession of the O'Connell family of Knockastrickane, Conna, in north-east Cork, who may have acted as a conduit for mail arriving in Ireland for Lynch. The O'Connells, although not prominent in the movement, were well-known local republicans and involved with the IRA during the war of independence and civil war. When the last of the family died in the late 1970s, the contents of their house were sold at auction, including a chest-of-drawers which was bought by the Barrys of Carrigmore. Inside this piece of furniture, the late John Barry discovered an extraordinary letter to Liam Lynch from his brother, Tom (a priest based in Australia), and, realising its significance, he put it aside. The letter was more or less forgotten until 1997 when his son, Pa Barry, was going through his papers and re-discovered it. Mr Barry firmly believes that

Lynch never received the letter, and it has probably remained in Conna since its arrival in Ireland.

The item, dated 1 March 1923, was sent from Australia and is unlikely to have reached Cork before the end of that month.¹ This was a time when Lynch was constantly on the move, and even Eamon de Valera found him awkward to contact. On 15 March, he was near Ballingearry in County Cork, but within days he had moved north to the environs of Mount Melleray before decamping east to Bliantass for an IRA executive meeting that took place on 23-26 March. Following this, he shifted further north as far as Callan, and between then and his death on 10 April, he was never in the vicinity of Conna.² In other words, Lynch could not have abandoned the letter in the O'Connell house, and the belief that it never reached him is almost certainly well-founded.

AN IMPORTANT CONFIDANTE

In that context, the letter could be dismissed as having no bearing on Lynch's state of mind during those final weeks. However, Fr Tom Lynch was no ordinary correspondent; in fact, he was extremely close to his brother and was an important political confidante from at least 1917.³ Tom was a clerical student in Thurles during the post-Rising period and, while he did not prominently involve himself in the resurgent separatist movement, he did share in the enthusiasm, developing

politically in tandem with his brother. Their nationalism had the same romantic texture and messianic quality, and their opposition to the treaty was ultimately founded on these shared values.

The political and 'ideological' perspectives of those who fought the civil war have received significant attention in recent years.⁴ Liam Lynch has not attracted much interest, although Tom Garvin has used him to highlight a republican *mentalité* that was 'contemptuous of electoral politics' and of 'the ordinary citizen' in political life.⁵ Garvin's generalisations regarding republican motivations are not entirely convincing, but his depiction of Lynch as a 'fundamentalist republican'⁶ echoes much previous commentary and is difficult to dispute. Florence O'Donoghue, Lynch's biographer and erstwhile comrade, in an otherwise sympathetic study, admitted a lack of 'flexibility of character' in his subject and, interestingly, mused that he 'could have made a great priest.'⁷ He also referred to Lynch's 'utter indifference to public opinion',⁸ while Peadar O'Donnell, though declaring Lynch a 'very good person', similarly attested to his elitist and single-minded outlook: 'He could not descend from the high ground of the Republic to the level of politics.'⁹

This solidity of purpose is what drove Lynch during those dark final months of the civil war. Even when it was clear that defeat was inevitable, he refused to concede and opposed those, like Tom Barry, who highlighted the futility of further death and destruction.¹⁰ Lynch may have hoped somehow to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, but it is much more likely that, having decided his view, he intended to go down fighting for the republic; and, as the letter reproduced below indicates, his brother expected nothing less.

'NO PEACE BUT THE SWORD'

It is clear that the recent executions in Ireland lay heavily on the mind of Fr Tom Lynch as he sat down to write to his brother. Indeed, at various stages in the letter, he mentions the deaths of Rory O'Connor, Liam Mellows, Cathal Brugha and Dinny Lacy, all killed by the Free State, and he seems to believe that Dan Breen had met a similar fate. However, the recent statement from Liam Deasy, in which IRA leaders were asked to lay down arms, appears of greater concern; he expresses his 'delight' at Liam's rejection of this development, and indicates that what is needed is not 'peace but the sword.' In fact, the *leitmotif* of this letter is a warning against compromise or surrender, and he urges the IRA leader to '[f]ight on to the last man.'

There are two indications in the correspondence that Tom doubts his brother's will to continue. The first is his reference to Deasy, where he admits that he thought Liam might follow his example; the second is when he remarks that Liam has led well 'so far', as if to stress that the struggle against compromise was ongoing. The letter is clearly intended to strengthen Liam's resolve, even to the point of death. Tom counsels his brother that, if faced with execution, he 'will be able to look into the rifle barrels', and that Brugha and Mellows (both dead) would help him in this 'supreme test.' This was not a statement made lightly, as Tom knew that his brother's continued resistance would probably have fatal results, but he nonetheless pleaded with him to fight on.

It is a remarkable letter from one brother to another, and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Lynch is being urged towards his death. At one stage, Tom points out that 'life is short', and assures his brother that 'a few years extra' are of little consequence; in fact,

Bishops House
Gouldbourne
1. 3. 23.

Dear Liam

Here I am giving to chance another
line to you. It looks blue that it will ever
reach you, a danger of despatch, a danger
of censor, and a danger that you may be
Gods hand as when it arrives, & tell
here goes & god may guide it to you.
Two days ago my heart sank when a cable
news appeared in broad heading Ho. Value
& Lynch caught at last, next-day
papers denied, here's arrest - and when it
was not confirmed about you, I knew
it was all right. - If Prayers are any
good, you will be safe. I say Mass for
you often. Was surprised about
Liam's Deasy's Summer salt - was
terrible, what troubled me most
was, I thought you would agree also, you
can imagine my delight to see next-day

III. 1. Part of Fr Tom Lynch's letter to his brother, Liam, dated 1 March 1923 (courtesy Pa Barry)

Liam had less than six weeks left before he was fatally wounded on 10 April during a gunbattle on the slopes of the Knockmealdown mountains.¹¹ Tom lived for another twenty-seven years, became parish priest of Bega, New South Wales, and enjoyed a full life before his death on 28 March 1950.¹² He remained a strong nationalist and an ar-

dent admirer of his dead brother.

TEXT

The text of Fr Thomas Lynch's letter follows. It is published in full and as it was written; the original structure, punctuation, misspellings and grammatical infelicities are retained.

DOCUMENT

Bishops House
Goulbourne
1.3.23

Dear Liam,

Here I am gowing to chance another line to you. It looks blue that it will ever reach you, a danger of dispatch, a danger of censor, and a danger that you may be God's knows where, when it arrives, still here goes & god may guide it to you.

Two days ago my heart sank when a cable news appeared in broad heading De Valera & Lynch caught at last, next day papers denied Dev's arrest, and when it was not confirmed about you, I knew it was all right. If Prayers are any good, you will be safe. I say Mass for you often. Was surprised about Liam's Deasy's summer salt twas terrible, what troubled me most was, I thought you would agree also, you can imagine my delight to see next day no Peace but the sword, & big extracts from Proclamations by C.I.D. stuff. Good man you saved the situation in dashing style, the murderers got a drop. They put the extremists to rest in quick time, I mean Rory & Mellows, thinking perhaps the rest of you were compromises, but it seems ye are wide awake. Did you get my letters from Adelaide. I got yours in Goulbourne which you addressed from home.

There are I. R. associations started here & the British press clamoring for suppression. There is a monthly paper started in Melbourne Irish news giving extracts from public it has a circulation of 5000 miles. Say in what way could Australia help be started. At present it is principally Propaganda but later cash may be forthcoming. Some good workers in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney. Ye are putting up a great fight. Only remember the motto, (no surrender) and all will be well, you have led well so far.

In case of execution you will be able to look into the rifle barrels; life is short, what matter a few years extra. Brugha & Mellows will help you in the supreme test. There are nuns praying here in the Convent for De Valera & ye all. Sorry for poor Lacy & [word unclear] Breen, the best of Tipp. gone. I am doing well here in

the bush plenty of horse riding etc, Please God we will meet again in the old land in 10 years time but it doesnt matter, we will all meet hereafter: yours is an awful life now, terrible responsibility but be brave, true, & humble. Fight on to the last man. The nations honour is being vindicated. God bless you in Irelands cause & enable you to continue a rebel unchanged and unchangeable.

Your loving brother
Tom

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 On postal transmission times from Australia, see David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Cork, 1995), p. 468.

2 Florence O'Donoghue, *No Other Law: The Story of Liam Lynch and the Irish Republican Army, 1916-23* (Dublin, 1953), pp. 295, 299-303.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 12, 18, 60-1, 183, 245.

4 See, for example, Tom Garvin, *1922: The Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin, 1996); Peter Hart, *The IRA and its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916-23* (Oxford, 1998); and John M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921-36* (Dublin, 1999).

5 Garvin, *1922*, p. 43.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 126. Garvin's view of Lynch has been endorsed by Michael Laffan; see his *The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Fein Party, 1916-23* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 423-4.

7 O'Donoghue, *No Other Law*, p. 17.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

9 Quoted in Uinseann Mac Eoin (ed.), *Survivors* (Dublin, 1980), p. 25.

10 Michael Hopkinson, *Green Against Green: The Irish Civil War* (Dublin, 1988), pp. 233, 237-8.

11 An interesting account of Lynch's death, by an IRA eyewitness, can be found in *An Phoblacht*, 19 April 1930.

12 O'Donoghue, *No Other Law*, p. 3.