

"From the Beef Shop to the Boot Shop!"

By John Campbell

I am sure that many country people will share my earliest memory of meeting with a policeman.

One afternoon, when I came home from school, there was a large, strange bicycle propped up against the railings at the front of our house. Inside at the end of the kitchen table sat a huge, uniformed man writing in a book. He was Constable William Gethins from Poyntzpass RUC Station and he was taking details of the Annual Tillage return from my father.

Constable Gethins was, I believe, a native of Garrison, Co. Fermanagh. His father had been a member of the R.I.C and when he, in his turn, became a policeman he was stationed in Crossmaglen before coming to Poyntzpass. He served in Poyntzpass for many years until his retirement and lived for some time in the Orlits at the top of the Chapel Hill. I later became aware that he had three daughters who attended school in Newry. He was the first policeman I can remember.

Although most people will obey most laws willingly there has always been a need for some means of maintaining order. In small communities, where everybody knows everyone else, losing the esteem of those around you can be a greater punishment than anything handed down by the institutions of law. Small communities have many social ties through schools, churches and other local organisations and this imposes constraint on those who might consider illegal activity. Only when this sort of informal control breaks down is action by the police and courts necessary. And so, I would say, it has been in the Poyntzpass district and I know that policemen who served here remembered their time in the district with a good deal of nostalgia.

In the early days of policing, public humiliation was recognised as an effective deterrent; one exam-

ple of that was the practice of wheeling a drunk through a village in a wheelbarrow. Apart from that a quiet word in a parent's ear could have a lasting effect on a young person tempted to stray out of line. I was told of a local man who still remembers clearly the visit of the policeman to his mother with a complaint from a neighbour woman that he and his pals had made very uncomplimentary remarks about her underwear!

From earliest times in Ireland, Justices of the Peace had the power to enrol Special Constables where necessary. In towns they were known as 'Watchmen' and in rural areas as 'Parish Constables'. Their duties included patrolling at night with a lantern and a pike.

By the beginning of the 19th Century there was a good deal of dissatisfaction with this poorly equipped, untrained police force that appeared totally ineffective in combating the rising crime.

They showed little enthusiasm for the job, and at fairs and markets, where fights broke out, they usually made themselves scarce only to re-appear when the battle was over and arrest the exhausted survivors. This tactic was not entirely lost with the passage of time, for I heard about a policeman in Poyntzpass who knew a thing or two about timing on such occasions. I was told a story about two local men who fell out about the distribution of the 'Belfast Telegraph' in the village and started to fight on the street. A lady who lived in the main street and who never missed what was going on, saw the policeman, who witnessed the fight, taking himself 'offside' and she later reproached him. She was told to mind her own business and the policeman explained that he had deliberately let the two men have a 'crack' at each other so that when he appeared they would be glad to see him.

Most people date a modern Irish police force to



Former RIC Barracks, Railway Street.

1814 when Robert Peel, who had been appointed Chief Secretary for Ireland in 1812, formed the 'Peace Preservation Force'. Later, Peel, as Secretary of State for the Home Department, introduced the Metropolitan Police Act in 1829. This was the first uniformed police force and it drew its recruits mostly from old soldiers and was commanded by military officers with a mounted section known as 'Dragoon' police. Each horse carried two men, one sitting on a raised pad at the back and carrying a rifle. They had the desired effect at disturbances at fairs and markets. But old soldiers have never been the strictest upholders of the civil law, never mind its enforcement. Some of you will remember the escapades of Bob McIlroy in Frank Watters stories from the Petty Sessions.

Bob regularly appeared at the Poyntzpass Petty Sessions and accounts of his activities and their consequences were duly recorded in the local newspapers. Once described in 'The Newry Reporter' as *"the hero of many a fight against the wily De Wet and the Boers on the South African veldt"* a report in the same paper in May 1910 went as follows :-

"An army reserve named Bob McIlroy, better known as "Goheet," got into trouble on Friday night in Poyntzpass. It appears Bob, who had only returned a few days from Armagh gaol, was on the spree. Now when "Goheet" is on the spree there is always fun at the 'Pass. It is alleged that after "knocking out" several stalwarts about the village Bob arrived at his lodgings, which was presided over by Rosie McQuaid, and that he struck Rosie and left her "speechless." Rosie was found unconscious anyway. The police were notified and the report spread that Rosie was "kilt." Consequently everyone in the village turned out, and the greatest excitement prevailed. Sergeant Sullivan located Bob, and made a frontal attack, to which "Goheet" succumbed, and he was marched off to the barracks. The doctor meanwhile attended Rosie. Next morning Bob had to put in an appearance at a Special Court held in the barracks before Mr. Heber A. Magennis, J.P., when he was charged with being a common drunkard and disturber of the peace. The sergeant, in his evidence, stated the manner in which the woman was brutally assaulted. She was for three hours unconscious. He also told of other assaults committed by McIlroy on that evening. His language was very bad.

A large number of convictions against the prisoner for drunk and disorderly conduct were proved, and, it was added, he was only back from doing fourteen days received at the last Petty Sessions.

He was repeatedly drinking and using filthy language to ladies, and continually raising rows in the village. The sergeant asked to have him bound over to keep the peace. His Worship said that conduct of this kind could not be tolerated. The prisoner had got repeated chances to reform, but instead he was getting worse. His conduct was a very bad example in the district. So far as he was concerned he would put a stop to entertainments of this description in Poyntzpass. The prisoner would have to find bail to be of good behaviour for six months - himself in £10 and two sureties of £5 each - or, in default of finding bail, three months in Armagh gaol, with hard labour. Bail not being forthcoming, the prisoner was removed to gaol"

In 1822 Ireland was awash with old soldiers. Following the battle of Waterloo many regiments had been disbanded. Their return coincided with crop failures that led to extreme poverty and increased lawlessness. In that year the Constabulary of Ireland was formed under an Act that provided for a permanent, trained police force. Old soldiers were firmly discouraged from joining and recruits received three months training. Their commanding officers were, it was said, "*firm on discipline but tolerant in authority.*"

Their badge, which appeared in a diamond shaped piece of grey wood above the doors of their new barracks, was a shamrock leaf surrounded by the word Constabulary and the whole surmounted by a crown.

In 1867 Queen Victoria commanded that the force was to be renamed the Royal Irish Constabulary. At the beginning of the last century there were, apart from Poyntzpass, 28 other RIC stations in Co. Armagh with over 200 men. The RIC barracks in Poyntzpass was at Railway Street. In 1909 when "Gopeet" McIlroy made one of his appearances at the Petty Sessions the Sergeant in Charge in Poyntzpass was Robert Somers and the Constables included Constable McClelland and Constable Scully. McClelland was described as "*the genial limb of the law*" and his colleague as "*the Herculean Constable Scully*"

Among the RIC rules was one that stipulated that that the proportion of married men should not exceed a fifth of the force. The result was that marriage was therefore a privilege to be bestowed by the Inspector General. No man could record his name on the marriage waiting list until he had completed 5 years service and he could expect to remain on the list for at least 2 years. Then, as the rules stated, "*this indulgence would only be granted to well conducted men and on the production of satisfactory references as to the conduct, character, and respectability of the females to whom they wished to be united.*"

After the 1916 Rising in Dublin Lloyd George resurrected the 1914 Government of Ireland Act which proposed Home Rule and the Government of Ireland Act 1920 made provision for two Parliaments and a Council of Ireland. However control over the forces of law and order would, it was proposed, remain at Westminster. There followed the Anglo-Irish war that was waged throughout 1920 and 1921 and culminated in the signing of the Treaty in December 1921.

Throughout 1920 there were many attacks on RIC barracks and these led to the closure of small barracks, including Poyntzpass, which could not be adequately defended. A barracks at Loughbrickland which had only been vacated a short time earlier was burnt down as were barracks at Cullyhanna and Omeath with attacks on many other stations in the locality. In early July 1920 a party of armed men entered the signal cabin at Poyntzpass at 2 a.m. and held up the signalman J. Graham for over an hour blocking some goods trains. They produced revolvers and warned Graham not to go near the telephone.

Others of the party went up the Village Street and returned after some time. It was thought that it had been intended to burn down the vacant barracks at Railway Street. But when it was discovered that the barracks had been sold just the previous day no attack took place. Mr James Magill had bought the building from Mrs. Hudson for £700.

The RIC, who had 364 of its members killed in the 5-year period from 1916 to 1921, was now a demoralised force facing an uncertain future. It remained answerable to the British Authorities in Dublin but



Former RUC Barracks Poyntzpass.

their withdrawal under the terms of the Treaty, signalled the end of the force which was formally disbanded on 11 April 1922, 100 years after its formation. Under the terms of its disbandment members of the force could join the newly formed Royal Ulster Constabulary or the Palestine Police and were awarded a pension with 12 years service added on. Many chose, as they described, "to go north" and so police from places like Kerry and Cork joined the ranks of the new police force here.

In the face of the worsening security situation in 1920 the old practice of recruiting special constables was resurrected. Although recruitment advertisements described it as an all-Ireland scheme the special force drew its support almost exclusively from northern loyalist vigilante groups and remnants of the old UVF force. There were 3 classes of specials, A, B, and C. Class 'A' were full time, enlisted, uniformed men to serve a minimum of 6 months and were paid 10/= a day plus allowances £3. 17. 6. a

week. Married men received separation allowances of 14/= and there was a bounty of £25 a year in lieu of pension rights. 'B' specials were required for occasional duty and would receive some allowance for drill service and £5 for 6 months service. They got caps and armlets as did 'C' specials who were called out only in an emergency in their own district and were to be unpaid. Responsibility for law and order was devolved to the Northern Ireland Parliament in November 1921. Recruitment to the newly formed RUC was slow and the force was concentrated in the larger centres of population and along the border where considerable communal strife was taking place. Other rural areas were policed by fully mobilised 'A' Specials.

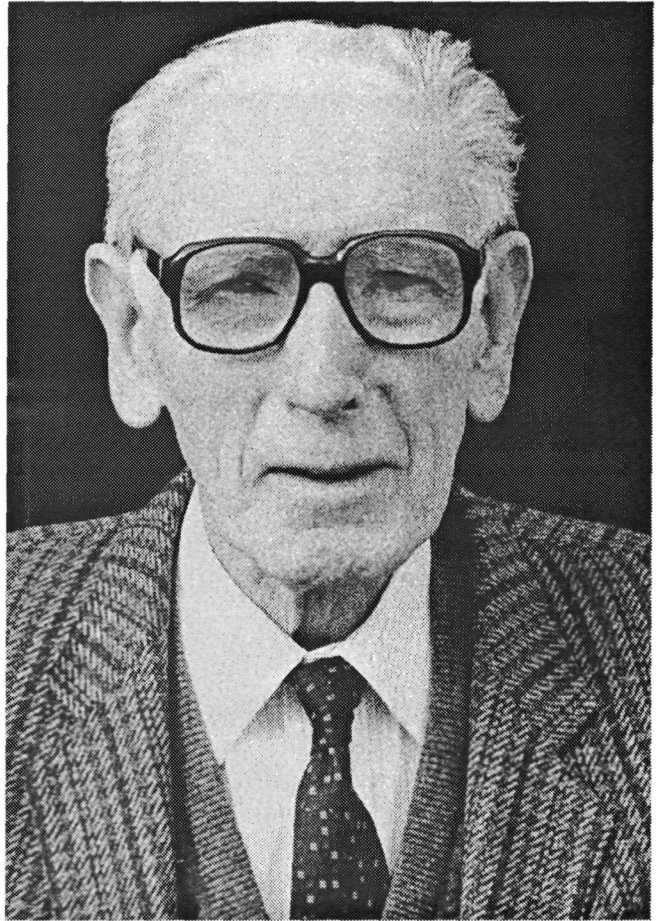
I am told that an Andy Bicker served locally as a full time Special Sergeant and other Specials to serve on a full time basis in the area included Davy Taylor, George Bicker and James Allen Purdy. At one time a 'B' Sergeant and three special constables operated

in the area. Other Specials names mentioned to me, although they may have served at different times, included Sam Shanks, George Hamilton and Albert Purdy. In the absence of accommodation they may have operated from their own homes.

However I have seen references to a station in Scarva which closed down when the RUC station in Poyntzpass opened. In 1920 a Constable Crawford described as RUC Scarva summonsed James Bicker of Killysavan for no licence for his dog - he was fined 1/=-.

As early as 1922 ministerial authority had been obtained for a RUC station at Poyntzpass and there were a number of petitions from the local magistrates Gilleland, Mathers and Small urging the authorities to have a station opened as soon as possible. A number of existing properties in the village were inspected including a house belonging to a Mr. M. Canavan which could be bought for £1,100 or to rent for £60 a year. Also on the market was a house belonging to a John Byrne that was described as one of the best houses in the district. Miss McShane's houses in Chapel Street were also inspected. When it was decided to construct a new building there were sites for sale belonging to Thomas McComb and Robert Carson but in January 1925 the Committee of the Presbyterian Church agreed to sell the Manse Garden in Chapel Street consisting of 3 roods and 12 perches for £130.

The contract to build the new station was awarded to William McKinney of Lisavague Portadown. Mr. McKinney's daughter was married to Herbie Troughton here in Poyntzpass and with his sons Charles, Bobby and Fred he had carried out other building contracts in the area including poultry houses at Drumbanagher estate. John Trainor informs me that Paddy Convery drew the bricks for the new barracks up from the railway station in his horse and cart. Nine years after the closure of the old RIC station, the new RUC Barracks opened on 31st August 1929. It was described as "*a most imposing structure*" and the best of a number of stations being opened at that time. Sergeant Rowe, transferred from Dromintee, was placed in charge with Constables T. Jackson and J. Malcolmson from Tandragee, J.R.W. Morrow from Crossmaglen, and a new Constable from the depot which, in those days, was in Newtownards.



John Trainor.

The telephone was installed on 2 September 1929. The 'phone number was Poyntzpass 5. The other four telephones in the district were the Post Office, Poyntzpass 1, J Best; 2, M. Canavan; 3 and Captain Close; 4!

The new Sergeant Rowe was soon in action stamping out lawlessness and the unfortunate George Donaldson was one of his first victims caught cycling at Killybodagh without a light. Sergeant Rowe had a strong southern accent and I'm told his favourite saying was "*Come tell me now*". I was told about him giving evidence in a case in which he described a stretch of Poyntzpass street as "*from the beef shop to the boot shop*." He may have been difficult to understand but he is unlikely to have annoyed the magistrate as much as the Sergeant who summonsed the Loughbrickland man for having two goats "*wondering*." The defence solicitor said he was puzzled about the summons and the magistrate said he "*wondered*" how the policeman had ever come to be a sergeant. Sergeant Rowe also had a local grocer before the court for too much water in his butter - 17.2% when it should have been 16% !



Photo taken in June 1950 at Poyntzpass Barracks. Back row: L-R Constables Young, Gethins and Dolan. Front row: Constable Boston, Sergeant Trimble and Constable Douglas.

In a community where there was little serious law breaking summons must have been hard to come by and indeed lighting offences and the occasional case of drunkenness appear to have made up the bulk of the cases brought before the courts. Johnny Minnis of Drumbanagher was fined one time for having no bell on his bike.

He got a new bell and for a long time afterwards every time he came to Poyntzpass he cycled up and down past the barracks ringing the bell!

Policemen went out from the barracks on patrol on their bicycles and there were what was known as 'meet patrols' when the sergeant would cycle off to meet the sergeant of the adjoining district at the boundary where they would exchange information. I suspect Jerrettspass was such a venue; it certainly was the boundary of the Poyntzpass area and a dangerous place for transgressors.



Paddy McCourt.

My father and Paddy McCourt were stopped there as they cycled home from Newry one night by a Constable Steve Donahue (ex RIC). They had no lights on their bicycles and noticed nothing until the policeman appeared suddenly in front of them and asked "How do ye think you are getting on boys?" "Oh now" Paddy McCourt replied "We were doing all right until we met you." They were summonsed and fined at Tandragee court. My father and Peter Gribben were good friends - he would have 'ceiled' in our house - and there was very little that went on about Poyntzpass that Peter didn't know. But to my father's surprise Peter never mentioned the court case. Curiosity got the better of my father and one evening at dusk, coming home through Poyntzpass from his work on the canal, he saw Peter sitting on the seat at Carson's. He shouted across "Peter would you have a lamp I could borrow for my bike?" Peter said "No but if you go down to Donahue in the Barracks he will fix you up!"



Peter Campbell.

Johnny Reid from Drumantine was up visiting his brother in Searce above Jerrettspass. On his way home a Constable Boylan joined him at Jerrettspass and cycled down the road with him. When they arrived at the corner where Johnny was turning off the main road the policeman told him "You are John Reid from Drumantine and you will be summonsed for no lights"

In May 1933 the police in Poyntzpass had a serious crime on their hands. On 4th May that year the body

of 65 year old William McGivern was discovered in a flax dam a short distance from his home at Corcum. He had a severe throat wound and although his wrists were tied an inquest found on the evidence submitted by Dr. McDermott that the wound was self inflicted. The finding of the body was described in the Newry Reporter as follows,



Constable Robert Cherry leaves Poyntzpass RUC Station March 1967 for a tour of duty on his bicycle.

When the old man was reported missing neighbours joined in an intensive search which resulted in the finding of his body in the early hours of Tuesday morning. There was a dramatic scene at the recovery of the body. Around the flax-dam which formed a fairly deep pool of inky water, were grouped police and farm workers, who watched in silence as Constable Scott Pearce and Constable David Baxter grappled with hooks to grip the still form in the water.

By the yellowish light of lanterns and bicycle lamps the dead man was brought to the surface and tender hands drew him from the pool. His wrists were seen to be tied together with a necktie.

Later two of William McGivern's sons, Thomas Henry and George, were arrested and charged with his murder. At that stage investigation was taken

over by the CID - Head Constable Slack. However the evidence of a handwriting expert and the support and testimony of Canon Nelson, Mr. and Mrs. W.T. Griffiths, teachers in Drumbanagher school, and Captain Close resulted in the charges being withdrawn. The case makes interesting reading.

Apart from those mentioned already other policemen who served in Poyntzpass included Sergeant A. Roberts in 1931 - his children attended Drumbanagher school. G.H. Nelson was the Sergeant in 1939, G.F. Napier in 1941 and in 1946 G.F. Irwin. Andrew Trimble was here in 1950 - he was a keen amateur photographer and I'm told had a phobia about fireworks. Sergeant G.A. Jackson was in charge in 1963. I understand Sergeant Jackson had served here earlier as a constable. Sergeant D.K. Rodgers was the Sergeant in charge when the barracks closed in 1967.



Workmen demolishing the Far Pass bridge 1951 while Constable Gethins looks on.

The station consisted of two separate dwellings, one for the Sergeant and his family, and the other for single constables. Married constables found accommodation around the village. A Constable Campbell lived at 12 Chapel Street. Constable Fay who served in Poyntzpass married a member of the Hudson family. A Constable McWilliams lived in what is known as the 'far Pass.' Constable Pearce who is mentioned in the McGivern case is best remembered for his wife's short skirts. Mrs Pearce had a long nose and was told by an irate resident "If you could get a bit taken of your nose and put onto your skirt it would suit you better." There were two Constables Cook and as one had a lisp he was known as Constable 'Clook.' Other policemen included Strothers, McIlhagga, Graham and Boston. A Constable Pollard was known as "log book" - he was keen on checking commercial vehicles. Constables Cherry and Busby also served here. As a member of St. Patrick's Accordion Band, Poyntzpass, I recall that a policeman would always accompany us on our outings. I

remember one or two very good drummers among our escorts.

In common with many other places the cells in the barracks here were known as 'the black hole' and I'm told a local character regularly ended up there on fair days. Locals remember a big fellow called Campbell from Tandragee who was occasionally kept in the cell overnight, given his breakfast in the morning and sent on his way.

Poyntzpass barracks closed in April 1967 at a time of rationalisation. John Trainor who has lived all his life beside the barracks gave me a very human picture of their presence here. He described 3 or 4 big men in their shirtsleeves out digging in the garden. He recalled "*a big strong fellow who didn't even need to put his foot on the spade.*" The Police Station had been in operation for over 45 years and its closure removed the personal contact between the community and the police and another feature of village life.



END OF AN ERA. Constables R. Cherry, L. Busby, A.T. Campbell and Sergeant D.K. Rogers watch workmen as they take down the R.U.C. sign at Poyntzpass Police Station when it closed in 1967.