

**National University of Ireland, Maynooth.**

# **John Rover McCann**

*Irish Volunteer*

By

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**Declaration:** This is my own original work and has not previously been submitted for assessment for any other university course.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Jack McCann.

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Joseph McCann.

James McCann.

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Margaret McCann Moore and Cepta Butler, Rush and Loughshinny Historical Society, provided much-valued additional sources.

Many other people offered their assistance and I thank them for their kindnesses.

Father's Stokes and Fitzgibbon were extremely obliging and forth coming with information also.



Plate 1: John Jack 'Rover' McCann.

## Introduction

Until very recently, military history has been synonymous with the history of generals and leaders. Very little attention was paid to the ordinary foot soldiers and their experiences of war. This is true of the 1916 Easter Rising and War of Independence in Ireland. One can read extensive biographies of Michael Collins, Eamonn De-Valera and other national figures but the experiences of ordinary volunteers and the sacrifices they made have been overlooked. This paper is an attempt to redress that imbalance. John Jack 'Rover' McCann, an agricultural labourer from Lusk, county Dublin, was an active volunteer from 1914 until his death at the hands of the Black and Tans in November 1920. Apart from two memorials in the towns of Lusk and Rush, his name is little known outside north county Dublin. Yet he, too, paid the ultimate price and laid down his life for his country just like the more famous Irishmen of that time in Ireland's history and therefore deserves to be remembered for his sacrifice just as the leaders were.

Over the course of three chapters I will endeavour to give the reader an insight into the life of Jack McCann and although some earlier work has been done on the subject I felt that there was scope for more research and that it could reveal more information, not only about Jack's life but that of his family too, including his younger brother, James, who was killed in the First World War fighting as a Dublin Fusilier in the British Army. In the first chapter I will look at the early years of his life, where he was born, his education, his move to Lusk with his parents when he was three years old and his pastime of hurling. Also examined are his membership of the Irish National Foresters and the background to his becoming an Irish Volunteer.

The second chapter deals with his involvement with the Fingal ~~Brigade~~ [Battalion]. This unit, under the command of the well-known nationalist Thomas

Ashe, participated in the battle of Ashbourne during Easter week 1916. It was this event that led to Jack's arrest after the general surrender and his imprisonment in Richmond barracks (Dublin), Knutsford prison (Cheshire) England and Frongoch prison camp (North Wales). In the third chapter I will look at how the period known as the War of Independence affected Jack and his wife Annie (nee Cosgrove) and their three sons, Daniel, Thomas and Sean. The circumstances surrounding his death at the hands of the auxiliary police force known as the Black and Tans in the early hours of the morning on 22 November 1920 are examined and also the funeral arrangements two days later to Lusk cemetery.

To achieve the aims set out above, I have used oral testimony, documents, and photographs, many of which were in the possession of the McCann family, most notably in the safe-keeping of Teresa McCann, wife of Sean, youngest son of Jack and Annie McCann. My interviews with Teresa and her whole-hearted co-operation with regard to the family documents in her possession and those in the possession of her sons and daughter, proved invaluable to this study. The census returns for 1901 and 1911 provided helpful biographical detail as did the parish records and school attendance registers of Loughshinny, Rush and Lusk national schools. Rush and Loughshinny Historical Society's archive proved invaluable as did the assistance of its chairperson, Margaret McCann Moore, whose godmother was Annie McCann. From that society's archive I was given access to a paper called 'John Rover McCann', written by Lennie Martin, Jimmy Archer and edited by Kevin Thorp, which had been presented to the society's members at Rush in 1992, and which proved a valuable source of information. Another publication, *Rush by the Sea*, written by the Rush I.C.A. ladies, contained an article about John McCann written by Carol Cosgrove, which also proved helpful. The contours of McCann's military career can

be traced by recourse to the extensive collection of papers retained in the National Archive and the Military History Bureau. Bernadette Marks kindly provided genealogical information about the McCann family, in particular Jack's birth date. Other sources of information were the National Library, Dublin City 'Gilbert' Library, National Museum and Kilmainham Jail Museum. The *Sinn Fein Rebellion handbook*, produced by the Irish Times Newspaper in 1917, was an essential source of information regarding arrests, imprisonments and release dates. Newspapers from the period were also searched and two reports were found regarding the murder of Jack McCann.

One major handicap found during my research was the complete lack of any personal written correspondence, i.e., letters he may have written to his family during the time when he was detained in prison, or any that they may have sent to him. None have survived. This serious loss was to some extent made up by a great deal of other material which remains in the possession of the McCann family. In this study I hope to be able to show how an ordinary agricultural labourer like Jack McCann became a well known and much loved figure amongst the communities of Rush and Lusk; a man whose name is still remembered with affection even to this day, eighty-four years after his death at the hands of the loathed Black and Tans.

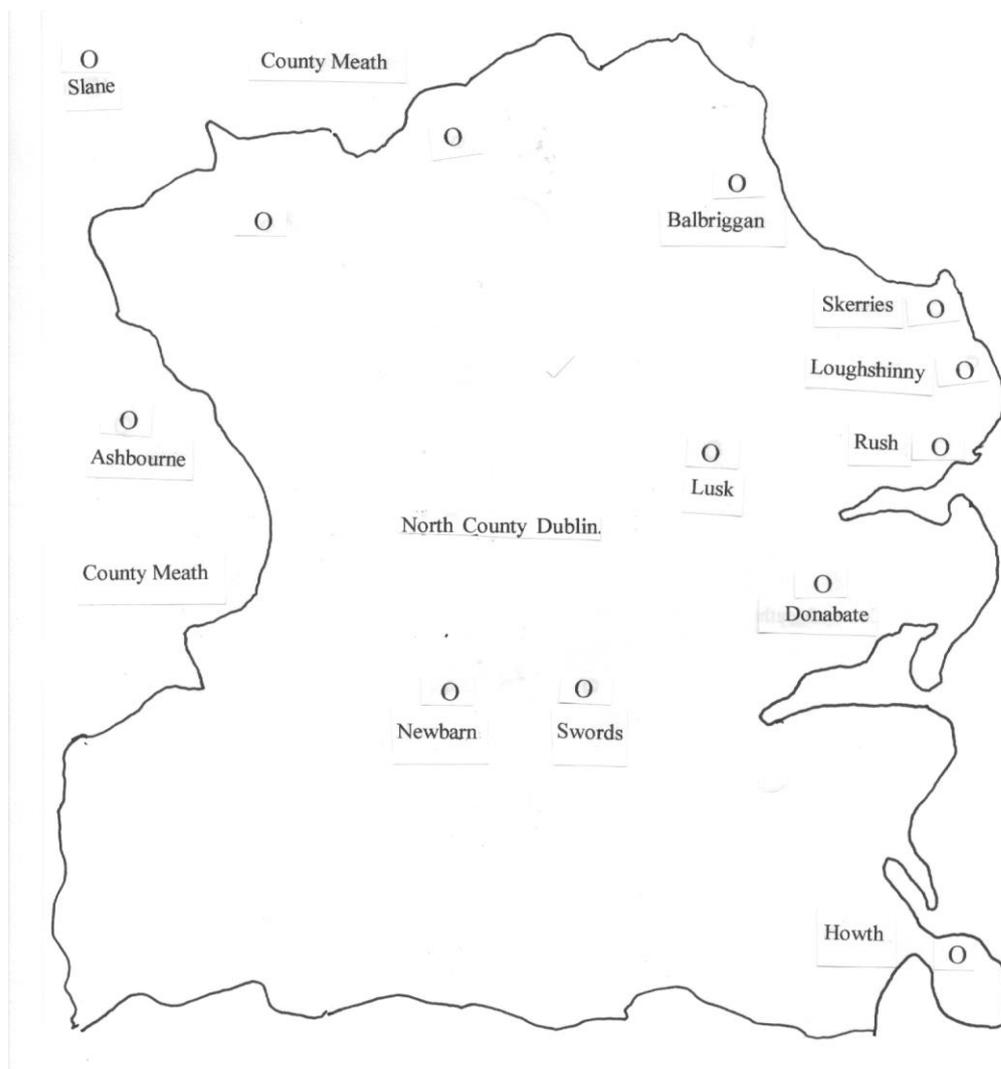


Plate 2: North county Dublin and Ashbourne, county Meath. The two places marked on the map but inadvertently left without names were Naul and Garristown.

## Chapter 1

## The Early Years

John Jack 'Rover' McCann was born on 26 July 1886 at Feather-bed Lane, Ballykea, Loughshinny, county Dublin.<sup>1</sup> He was baptised on 27 July at St Maur's Chapel, Rush, the witnesses were Michael Monks and Anna Fagan and the officiating priest was Father F.O. Carroll.<sup>2</sup> His father was Daniel McCann, born 1845, whose parents were Matthew McCann and Mary Moore and his mother was Sarah Murray, born 1856, and her parents were Christopher Murray and Margaret Fagan. Daniel and Sarah married on 24 September 1876 in Lusk, county Dublin, and both were born in that county.<sup>3</sup> Jack was the fourth born of nine sons, Matthew, Christopher, Daniel, Thomas, James, Joseph, Patrick and Peter.<sup>4</sup> The two eldest boys attended the nearby Loughshinny National School from the year 1886 and a note made by their teacher in the margin of the attendance roll book states that the McCann's had gone to live at Lusk on 16 March 1889 (Plate 3).<sup>5</sup> Jack was less than three years old when his family made the move to 34 Back Lane, Lusk. Their new home was a third-class dwelling, consisting of two rooms and built with mud walls and a roof of thatched straw.<sup>6</sup> Living in this small space were eleven family members, ranging in age from Dan's father, Matthew, who was eighty-five years old, down to Peter, who was only one year old.<sup>7</sup>

Daniel McCann was working as a railway labourer and according to the 1901 census he was fifty-six years old. His father had also worked on the railway but was retired and as his wife was deceased, he was living with his son. Dan's wife, Sarah, was forty years old and worked in the home caring for her family. In the same year

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<sup>1</sup> Bernadette Marks, Swords History Museum, interviewed by author, 28 Jan. 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Fr Stokes interviewed by author, 30 Jan. 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Census of Ireland, 1901.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> School Register, Loughshinny National School. Viewed by Concepta Butler, Loughshinny.

<sup>6</sup> Census of Ireland, 1901.

all the sons were living at home with the single exception of the eldest boy, Matthew, who was married and living elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Jack was fourteen-years old then and already working as an agricultural labourer so he must have gone straight to that type of work after leaving school.<sup>9</sup> As regards his education it is not clear exactly which school he attended and thus where he received his schooling. Only the two oldest boys, Matthew and Christopher, attended Loughshinny National School, and Jack was just three years old when the family left Ballykea, so it is clear that he did not attend that school.<sup>10</sup> A search of the school registers at Lusk by the school secretary revealed only the name of Peter McCann, the youngest boy, who had joined the school during September 1903, having come from an Infants class in Rush.<sup>11</sup> The school registers at Rush, which might have contained Jack's details, could not be found for the period concerned and according to a retired teacher from that school, she had neither seen nor heard mention of any roll books for the period around 1890 when Jack would have been attending school.<sup>12</sup>

This lack of definitive information leaves me in a quandary, Jack's name was not found at Lusk National School, a place where we would logically have expected to find his enrolment details and as he was too young to attend at Loughshinny before the family moved home, then I am left with no option but to conclude that he must have attended Rush National School, as did his younger brother Peter.

Comparing the living conditions of the McCann family with other families living on the Back Lane, Lusk, during the period around 1901, it appears that the

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<sup>7</sup> Census of Ireland, 1901.

<sup>8</sup> National Library of Ireland, microfilm, Pos. 6616.

<sup>9</sup> Census of Ireland, 1901.

<sup>10</sup> School registers, Loughshinny National School.

<sup>11</sup> Oral testimony of Pearle Finnegan, Lusk, 2 June 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Oral testimony of Peggy Rigney, Rush, 2 June 2004.

McCann's were by far the most congested as regards the amount of living space per family member.<sup>13</sup>

Jack liked the game of hurling and he played regularly for the Lusk Round Towers, G.A.A., Club. His nephew James carried on the tradition and also played for the club.<sup>14</sup> A photograph dated c.1906, shows a group of hurlers, one of which includes Jack and two others with the surname McCann who may have been his older brothers Daniel and Matthew.<sup>15</sup> It is said around Lusk that Jack played many competitive games over the years and is supposed to have won a county championship medal with the team in 1915. However, there is no mention of this in a 1981 publication called 'Lusca Abu' which chronicles the club's history since its inception around 1906, an omission that seems to suggest that it may not have happened at all.<sup>16</sup>

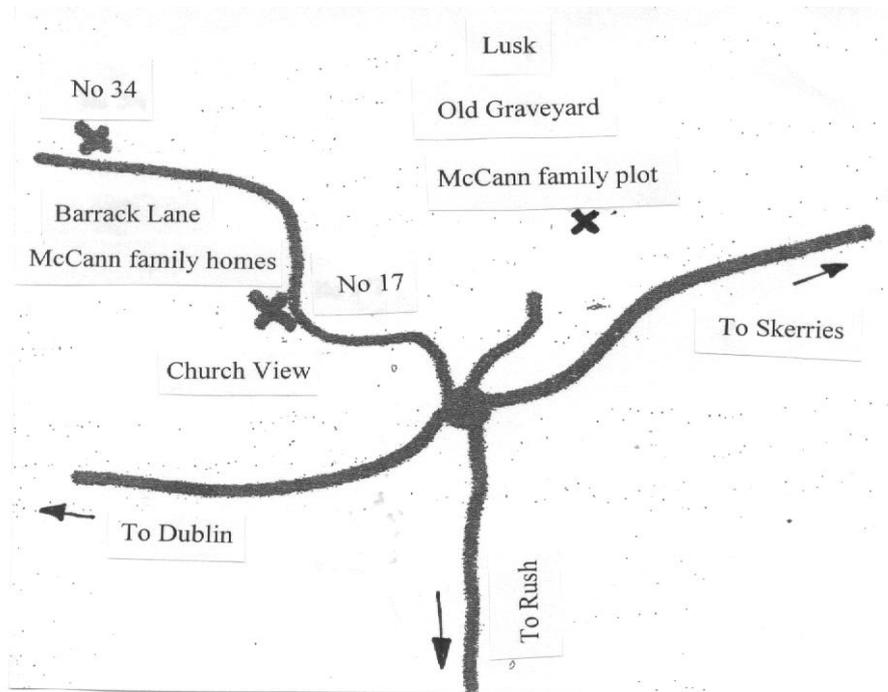


Plate 3: McCann family residences in Lusk village. Sketch drawn by author.

<sup>13</sup> Census of Ireland, 1901.

<sup>14</sup> James McCann, Lusk, interviewed by author, 5 July 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Photograph in possession of Pat Kelly, Lusk.

A look at the McCann family's circumstances using information taken from the census return for 1911 shows some remarkable changes, not least in the deaths of Sarah and Matthew senior. Matthew was around ninety years old when he died but Sarah was less than fifty years old so perhaps the pressure of caring for so many people of widely different ages, varying from the grandfather who was eighty-five years down to baby Peter who was only one year, had finally taken its toll on her health. Sarah had married young, bore at least nine children one after the other and died at a relatively young age even for those times. Was this as a result of all that stress imposed on her body from being pregnant nearly all the time and caring for too many people at one time? Probably. Another major change in the family's situation was the fact that they had moved from their former home, 34 Back Lane, to 17 Back Lane (Plate, 3). This dwelling was similar to the previous one but was larger and had an extra room. Another big difference was that instead of eleven occupants sharing the living accommodation, there were now only five people. Daniel was still head of the household, his age was given as sixty years but this is at odds with the details given in the earlier census in which he is stated to have been fifty-six years old, clearly one of these entries is an incorrect one. Sharing the home with Daniel at that time were his sons, Christopher, twenty-eight years old, single and working as an agricultural labourer, John 'Rover', twenty-five years old, single and also working as an agricultural labourer. Patrick was fourteen years old and a scholar, Peter, eleven years old and a scholar.<sup>17</sup> An interesting fact is that when the McCann's moved out of 34 back Lane, the Devine family moved in, and, in later years, two of their daughters, Ellen and Mary, married two of Daniel's sons, Christopher and Thomas.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Lusca Abu*, in possession of Pat Rooney, Jordanstown, Lusk.

<sup>17</sup> Census of Ireland, 1911.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph McCann, Lusk, interviewed by author, 5 July 2003.

Jack's pastimes was hurling and his membership of organisations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish National Foresters brought him into contact with their culture of fostering feelings of national pride in all things Irish and he may have been influenced by all this nationalistic fervour, as were many others at that time. The nationalists of Lusk got a big boost when Thomas Ashe came to the area in 1908 to take up the school principal's position at nearby Corduff National School.<sup>19</sup> Ashe had nationalism ingrained in his bones from his upbringing on his parent's farm near Lispole, county Kerry. He was a fluent Gaelic speaker and musician as well. He was well liked by both the pupils attending his school and their parents, many of whom rated Ashe very highly as a teacher as he got results without recourse to corporal punishment. His teaching methods sometimes brought him to the attention of the Board of Education authorities in Dublin, who were displeased by his deviation from the set curriculum.<sup>20</sup>

Ashe helped form the Black Raven Pipe Band around 1910 and the band went from strength to strength. Although Jack McCann does not appear to have had any involvement with it, his first cousin Mattie was a very influential member of it all his life.<sup>21</sup> As soon as Ashe settled into his new job he began to organise events locally with a view to raising awareness in the people of all things Irish and in this regard he was very successful indeed. Soon after the Irish Volunteer movement was formed in Dublin on 25 November 1913, Ashe formed a company in Lusk and it was probably then that Jack McCann joined up, although it is impossible to give an exact date. In any case, becoming a member of the Irish Volunteers was a relatively easy affair

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<sup>19</sup> Sean O'Mahony, *The first hunger striker, Thomas Ashe 1917* (Dublin, 2001), p.6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p.7.

<sup>21</sup> Maureen McCarthy, Lusk, interviewed by author, 7 June 2003.

unlike joining the Irish Republican Brotherhood, of which Ashe was a member.<sup>22</sup> There was no oath to take, just a signature on a membership card and a verbal commitment to attend the company's meetings for drilling and marching was deemed as sufficient to gain entry.

Thomas Ashe set about training volunteers from Lusk and some from Turvey, near Donabate, drilling them in the art of soldiering and exercises took place several times per week.<sup>23</sup> They took part with other north county units in the Howth gun-running, which took place on Sunday 26 July 1914, when the 'Asgard' unloaded her cargo of rifles and ammunition onto the harbour quay at Howth, county Dublin. The weapons were German Mauser type rifles with a large bore and were very cumbersome articles. They came to be known as 'Howth Mausers', had no magazine, being single shot weapons, yet, according to Michael McAllister, in their innocence, the men were very proud of them.<sup>24</sup> Many volunteers got a Howth rifle that day including men from Skerries, Swords and St Margaret's but it appears that the Lusk men did poorly in getting Mausers for some reason, although they did procure an assortment of weapons at a later date.

When the First World War broke out in August 1914, things took on a different aspect. Quite a number of young men joined the British Army for a variety of reasons. The people's attention was distracted towards the War and there was a surge of pro-British feeling throughout the country. The Irish Parliamentary Party which should have been forcing the issue of Home Rule for Ireland, were also badly bitten by the pro-British bug. They had really turned themselves into recruiting agents for the British Army. Finally, the I.P.P., leader, John Redmond, made a speech at

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<sup>22</sup> Michael McAllister '1916 contemporary account of some events in Fingal' in Rena Condrot, Pat Hurley and Tom Moore (eds), *Old tales of Fingal (An Taisce Fingal, 1984)*, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Weston, witness statement (No.149) made to the Bureau of Military History, 1937.

<sup>24</sup> McAllister '1916 contemporary account of some events in Fingal', p.56.

Woodenbridge, county Wicklow, in which he said that it was the duty of the volunteers to join the British Army, or words to that effect. The result of this speech was to bring to a head a situation which had been brewing for quite a while and overnight the volunteer organisation was split in twain. The vast majority of volunteers continued to support Redmond and his party while a minority supported Pearse and MacNeill, and the original executive of the Irish Volunteers. There was now the spectacle of two volunteer forces in the country. The supporters of Redmond remained the Irish National Volunteers while the others reverted to their original name as the Irish Volunteers. The volunteers of Fingal split with about seventy percent opting for Redmond and the remaining thirty percent remaining true to their republican ideals. What arms were available then were held by individual volunteers so most of these went to Redmond's side after the split.<sup>25</sup> John Redmond was to experience tragedy later when his brother and son were killed in 1914 at the war front in France; his health was badly shaken by those events.<sup>26</sup>

In December 1914 the McCann family received very bad news, Dan's son, James, a soldier with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles, which was a part of the Dublin Fusiliers, had been killed on 9 December at the front line near Calais, France. He was only twenty-one years old. James had sent a 'Field Service Postcard' home to Lusk dated 5 December containing little information other than that he was feeling fine. However, by the time it arrived in Lusk, the situation had changed utterly for the worse and his young life was no more.<sup>27</sup> What effect this news had on Jack McCann or on any other member of the family is impossible to say as the only evidence that remains is the card itself and a brass plaque that is now in the possession

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> T.A Jackson, *Ireland her own: an outline history of the Irish struggle for national freedom and independence* (London, 1985), pp. 406-07.

<sup>27</sup> McCann's 'Field Service Card' in possession of Dympna Sherry, Lusk.

of his nephew, James McCann. It was not an unusual occurrence for brothers from within the same family to be on opposing sides at that time, many young men joined the British Army for a variety of reasons. Some wanted a bit of adventure in their lives, others wanted to see the world and others again to find steady employment. Why James McCann joined up is anybody's guess but he was shortchanged, drew the short straw and lost his life on a foreign field fighting another man's war. His remains now lie at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission memorial cemetery at Le Touret.<sup>28</sup>

Jack McCann was a member of the Lusk branch of the Irish National Foresters, which was named after parish priest, Fr Tyrell.<sup>29</sup> The Foresters regularly paraded through the villages and towns of rural Ireland where the members wore the Foresters uniform. The combination of colour and the feathered hat was very much admired by the young ladies.<sup>30</sup> A fine granite stone monument, which stands just inside the gates of St MacCullin's Chapel in Lusk, remembers Fr Tyrell's life and deeds. From McCann's membership card it appears that he joined the Foresters on the 23 July 1914. Inside the tiny booklet are details of his payment contributions where a total sum of £1.5s.10d., was paid during the last quarter of that same year.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Accessed from, [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org). (28 Sept. 2003).

<sup>29</sup> National Library of Ireland, Colonial Office Papers (C.O. 904).

<sup>30</sup> As suggested by Joseph Byrne, Lusk, 11 May 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Teresa McCann, Skerries, interviewed by author, 1 Feb. 2003.

## Chapter 2

## Easter 1916 and its aftermath

After the 'Redmondite-split', a battalion of Irish Volunteers was organised in the North county Dublin area under the command of Doctor Richard Hayes. Thomas Ashe was battalion adjutant and Frank Lawless was battalion quartermaster. Some short time before the Rising, Hayes and Ashe changed appointments; Ashe became O/C and Hayes, adjutant. The companies comprising the battalion were Swords, St Margaret's, Skerries and Lusk. All the companies were of skeleton formation and the whole battalion was about one-hundred strong. Training and field exercises were then being carried out in conjunction with city battalions.<sup>32</sup>

An order sent by Patrick Pearse to all brigade commanders told them to prepare their men for a route march on Easter Sunday 23 April 1916, and to bring their military equipment and rations sufficient for two days. Ashe organised his men and made arrangements to meet at ~~Knoekedan Bridge~~ [Rathbeale Cross] at mid-day on Sunday morning. The volunteers turned out almost to a man. However, the leader of the Irish Volunteers, Eoin MacNeill, issued a countermanding order on the Saturday night and placed an advertisement in the *Sunday Independent* warning that volunteers should desist from taking part in any activities not authorised by him. This meant that those men who had turned out expecting a weekend of route marching now found themselves waiting aimlessly and the rest of the day was spent around Saucerstown, Swords, at the home and farmyard of Frank Lawless. However, the men were subsequently sent home at a very late hour but were told to stay in readiness for a possible recall at any time. Jack McCann was with the Lusk contingent that made its way home dejected and disappointed with the way things had turned out. After all,

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<sup>32</sup> McAllister '1916 contemporary account of some events in Fingal', p. 57.

these men had wanted to fight, had trained hard, were ready for action and fed up waiting.

Pearse, Connolly and others met up later that day and after much deliberation decided that the rising should go ahead on the following day, Easter Monday. Ashe set about recalling his men for mobilisation at Knocksedan Bridge but this time the turnout was only about fifty percent of the men available for duty.<sup>33</sup> The reasons for the poor turnout were varied, communications with individual men was poor, another likely explanation was that some volunteers felt that the leader of the Irish Volunteers, Eoin MacNeill, had been treated badly and had in effect been forced to resign. Therefore, some volunteers stayed away as a show of loyalty to him. Furthermore, the order to abandon Sunday's plan came very late on Sunday night and it was after midnight before the order to stand down was given. Many of them had to cycle for hours before reaching home, a distance of about six miles for the Lusk men.

On the following day, once the volunteers (including McCann) had regrouped under Ashe's command, it soon became clear that something serious was afoot. News began to filter out from Dublin city that a rising had occurred there and everyone knew then that there was to be no going back. Ashe had been ordered to act independently and to cause maximum disruption in the north Fingal area.

With this in mind, on Easter Monday, according to Sean Ó Luing, Ashe 'led his men across the roads and fields of Fingal in an act of challenge to an empire'. In his small army were:

Fingal's best and bravest sons, the McAllisters of Turvey, their cousins the Westons, and their cousins, the Kellys; four Lawlesses shouldered their guns and marched; there were the Taylors and the Wilsons and the Doyles, who, in the person of Paddy Doyle maintained the link with the rebellion of 1798; the Black Raven bandmen were there; there was 19-year-old Thomas Rafferty, who could not ordinarily join in

the manoeuvres as his employment on the government farm at Lusk did not permit, but who promised to be there when the time came; there were Jack Crenigan and the “Rover” John McCann, described by his comrade John McAllister as the “bravest man a country ever had”.<sup>34</sup>

On Easter Monday, Ashe sent a small party (including McCann) to destroy the railway bridge at Rogerstown but only minor damage was caused to the down line due to an insufficient amount of dynamite being available and the line was put back into service a short time later.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, sufficient disruption had been caused to a war rally being held at Skerries that day that some of the speakers failed to appear because of the damaged railway line but the event went ahead anyway.<sup>36</sup> The town of Skerries remained on alert as it was believed by the loyalists that Thomas Ashe and his fabled hundreds were planning an attack on the Marconi wireless station on the outskirts of the town.<sup>37</sup> As a consequence, 200 soldiers of the North Staffordshire Regiment were brought by the warship ‘Boadiciea’ under the command of Captain Clay to save the day there.<sup>38</sup> It was thought that the rebels of Lusk, a place that had a reputation for being a hotbed of Sinn Feiners, had a definite plan to attack Skerries. In any event no such attack actually took place.<sup>39</sup> The ~~brigade~~ [battalion] was in action elsewhere that week. The R.I.C., barracks at Donabate and Swords were raided for arms and another attempt was made to blow the bridge at Rogerstown on Wednesday.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Weston, witness statement (No.149) made to the Bureau of Military History, 1937.

<sup>34</sup> Ó Luing, *I die in a good cause: a study of Thomas Ashe, idealist, and revolutionary*, p. 80.

<sup>35</sup> Desmond Ryan, *The Rising: complete history of Easter Week* (Dublin, 1949), p. 219.

<sup>36</sup> *Sinn Fein Rebellion handbook* (Irish Times Newspaper, 1917), pp. 36-37.

<sup>37</sup> Ryan, *The Rising: complete history of Easter Week*, p. 219.

<sup>38</sup> Daire Bruniciardi, *The Sea hound: the story of a small Irish ship* (Cork, 2001), p. 41.

<sup>39</sup> D Fitzpatrick ‘Skerries and the Rising of Easter week 1916’ *Skerries Historical Society*, Paper No.13, talk given in 1949. Also held by the National Library of Ireland, POS.7632.

<sup>40</sup> *Sinn Fein Rebellion handbook*, p. 37.

All this activity was taking place against a background of fierce fighting and mayhem in Dublin city of which the Fingal volunteers had barely an idea. An order came from James Connolly that forty men were to be sent to join city garrisons but Ashe could spare only twenty, sending them away under the command of Captain Richard Coleman. The remaining volunteers were equipped with bicycles and an assortment of weapons with Howth Mausers and Lee Enfield rifles predominating. The raids carried out on the police barracks at Swords and Donabate had added some much needed ammunition to the supply. Garristown barracks was next attacked but neither weapons nor ammunition were found there. Telegraph poles were cut at every opportunity in order to hinder communications. Food was commandeered as necessary and a lamb from Craigies's farm at Finglas provided a meal that many of the men said was the best they ever had. As the number of volunteers were low it was decided to throw out the old British infantry organisation methods in which they had been trained and adopted a scheme more suited to the numbers available and the tactical requirements of their mission. The new arrangement, which incidentally was quite sound from a tactical viewpoint, was to divide the entire force into four more or less equal sections of ten to twelve men, each under the command of an officer. The remaining four senior officers constituting the headquarters and command staff.

The operation procedure adopted at the time was that each day one section was detailed for foraging duty, with the job of protecting the camp during the day and night and also locating and procuring food supplies for the column. The remaining three sections, proceeding on the daily or other mission, moved always with the sections so spaced and detailed that the leading section constituted the advance guard and was responsible for all the duties of such. The rearmost section was similarly arranged as a rearguard, while the commanding officer with his staff moved normally

with the main body, which was the section between. The sections rotated duties daily. The commander and staff of the column were, according to Joseph Lawless (Col.) a fortunate combination and were largely, if not entirely, responsible for the successful exploits of the unit including the Ashbourne battle. The successful partnership was between Thomas Ashe and Dick Mulcahy, a straggler from a city garrison and already known to the members of the company. Mulcahy was noted for being cool, clear-headed and practical and with a personality and tact that enabled him to virtually control the situation without in any way undermining Ashe's prestige as the commander.<sup>41</sup>

On Friday 28 April, after breaking camp at Borranstown, the R.I.C., barracks in Ashbourne, county Meath, was attacked. The police would not surrender at first and replied with a hail of bullets. However after a thirty-minute siege they surrendered to Ashe's men. Just as he was taking possession of the barracks, reinforcements from Navan arrived via Slane. Ashe had to act quickly and, placing his men to best advantage, he attacked the R.I.C., in their cars. The ensuing battle lasted for over five hours and the courage and discipline told for the Fingal men in the end.<sup>42</sup>

After the R.I.C., force surrendered, they received medical attention from Dr Dick Hayes and, after a warning from Ashe not to be found in arms against him again, they were sent on their way. Many casualties were taken that day on both sides. Two volunteers lost their lives, John Crenigan, Roganstown, Swords and Thomas Rafferty of Lusk. Local undertaker Jim Brown took Rafferty's body back to Lusk for burial.<sup>43</sup> A fine limestone memorial was unveiled in April 1959 by the first President of Ireland, Sean T. O'Kelly, at the site of the battle at the Cross-of the Rath near Ashbourne, county Meath. Thematically it was based on the celebrated Ashe poem

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<sup>41</sup> Colonel Joseph Lawless, *Dublin's fighting story* (Tralee, c. 1950), pp. 60-61.

“*Let me carry your cross for Ireland Lord*”.<sup>44</sup> That encounter has gone down in history as being the only successful battle in the entire Easter Week campaign and it seems that the R.I.C., were never the same force thereafter.

The leader of the Irish Citizen Army, James Connolly, in his last dispatch from the GPO, on Friday 28 April 1916, had this to say about the Fingal ~~brigade~~ [Battalion]:

The men of north county Dublin are in the field, have occupied all the police barracks in the district, destroyed all the telegraph system on the Great Northern Railway up to Dundalk and are operating against the trains of the Midland and Great Western.<sup>45</sup>

News reached Ashe on the following day that Pearse had issued an order for a general surrender from his headquarters at 16 Moore Street, Dublin. When Ashe received the news from a sergeant from Swords R.I.C., barracks, he refused to accept it at first, so decided that Dick Mulcahy and Joseph Lawless should go into Dublin in a bid to have it confirmed. They soon returned to the Newbarn camp with the bad news and also told Ashe that a cavalry escort was on its way to place them under arrest. The immediate reaction of the men to the news was to treat it with derision. There were catcalls and shouts that it was a trick and that even if it were true they felt that they should continue to fight on their own. Mulcahy, however, reminded them that they had come out as soldiers, had behaved as soldiers and that Pearse, whom he had seen, was proud of them and that this was an order from him and could not be ignored. This calmed the men and they prepared for their arrest.<sup>46</sup> After a long delay, the group were taken into Swords and from there by motor lorry to Richmond barracks,

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<sup>42</sup> O’Mahony, *The first hunger striker, Thomas Ashe 1917*, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> Oral testimony of Jim Brown, Lusk, 24 July 2003.

<sup>44</sup> Colonel Joseph Lawless, *Dublin’s fighting story* (Tralee, c. 1950), pp. 60-66.

<sup>45</sup> Max Caulfield, *The Easter Rebellion*, (New York, 1963), pp. 311-12.

<sup>46</sup> McAllister ‘1916 contemporary account of some events in Fingal’, pp. 64-65.

Dublin. Jack McCann's case, he was arrested under the terms of the Defence of the Realm Act 1914. His arrest charge sheet carried the following details (plate 4).

(A)

NOTICE TO PERSONS WITH RESPECT TO WHOM  
AN ORDER IS MADE UNDER REGULATION 14 B.

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Name of Prisoner	<b>John McCann.</b>
Address	<b>Lusk, Co. Dublin.</b>
W.O. Number	<b>626B.</b>
H.O. Number	<b>315367.</b>

Notice is hereby given to the above named that an Order has been made by the Secretary of State under Regulation 14 B of the Defence of the Realm Regulations directing that he shall be interned at the Place of Internment at Frongoch.

The Order is made on the ground that he is of hostile associations and a member of an organisation called the Irish Volunteers or of an organisation called the Citizen Army, which have promoted armed insurrection against His Majesty, and is reasonably suspected of having favoured, promoted or assisted in armed insurrection against His Majesty.

If within seven days from the date of his receiving this notice the above named prisoner submits to the Secretary of State any representations against the revocation of the said Order, such representations will be referred to the Advisory Committee, appointed for the purpose of advising the Secretary of State with respect to the internment and deportation of aliens and presided over by a Judge of the High Court, and will be duly considered by the Committee. If the Secretary of State is satisfied by the report of the said Committee that the Order may, so far as it affects the above named prisoner, be revoked or varied without injury to the public safety or the defence of the realm, he will revoke or vary the Order accordingly by a further Order in writing under his hand. Failing such revocation or variation the Order will remain in force.

**Plate 4: Arrest warrant.**<sup>47</sup>

After 1916, the chief secretary to Ireland, Augustine Birrell, ordered that files held on any known persons who were suspected of being engaged in any subversive activities should be updated. He also decreed that each file should be categorised into one of three classes, A, B and C and that these classifications should indicate the level

<sup>47</sup> Arrest warrant in possession of Teresa McCann, Skerries.

of danger posed by each person to the defence of the realm. McCann's file shows that he was rated as being in the B-risk category. B-class prisoners were those who deserved punishment but who were not as important as A-class prisoners. Most of these took an active part in the rebellion and possibly the question of their release might well be delayed for a time until each case was reviewed by the local police. The situation in Ireland was also to be considered before any release took place and in particular, the state of the war was to be noted and whether or not any German soldiers had landed in Ireland.<sup>48</sup> McCann was removed from Richmond barracks on 2 May and lodged in Knutsford Prison in the English Midlands on 3 May 1916.<sup>49</sup> He remained in Knutsford until at least 9 June, when Frongoch Prison camp near Bala, North Wales, was ready to accept Irish prisoners.

The above camp was a former whiskey distillery which had been used to house German prisoners but these were sent elsewhere so that the camp could be used specifically to hold Irish political prisoners.<sup>50</sup> The idea was that Frongoch was isolated enough to prevent the Irish prisoners from having any contact with home and it certainly was isolated; the only habitation within miles was the little village of Bala. The village was situated at one end of Bala Lake which was the largest in Wales. It was served by a railway, an important facility as the prisoners had to be transported from all over Britain. The camp was split up into two parts, south camp and north camp. McCann was put into north camp where the prisoners were accommodated in wooden huts and during his time there he was accommodated in huts two and five which he shared with three other Lusk men, Dick Kelly, James Masterson and John [James?] Rooney.<sup>51</sup> The prisoners in Frongoch had a fair amount of free time and

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<sup>48</sup> National Archive of Ireland, C.S.O.R.P., 15564/16.

<sup>49</sup> *Irish Times*, 12 May 1916; *Evening Herald*, 12 May 1916.

<sup>50</sup> Sean O'Mahony, *Frongoch: University of Revolution* (Dublin 1987), p. 24.

<sup>51</sup> *Evening Herald*, 12 May 1916; National Library of Ireland, MS 1650.

each had his own way of passing it. Some played physical games like football and Jack probably took part in these games as well but he also liked to carve bones into shapes that took his fancy. One of these, in the shape of a holy water font (Plate 5) became his favourite and he brought it home with him as a present for his wife Annie.<sup>52</sup> In later years she donated it to Kilmainham Jail Museum where it is on permanent display in the exhibition hall.<sup>53</sup>

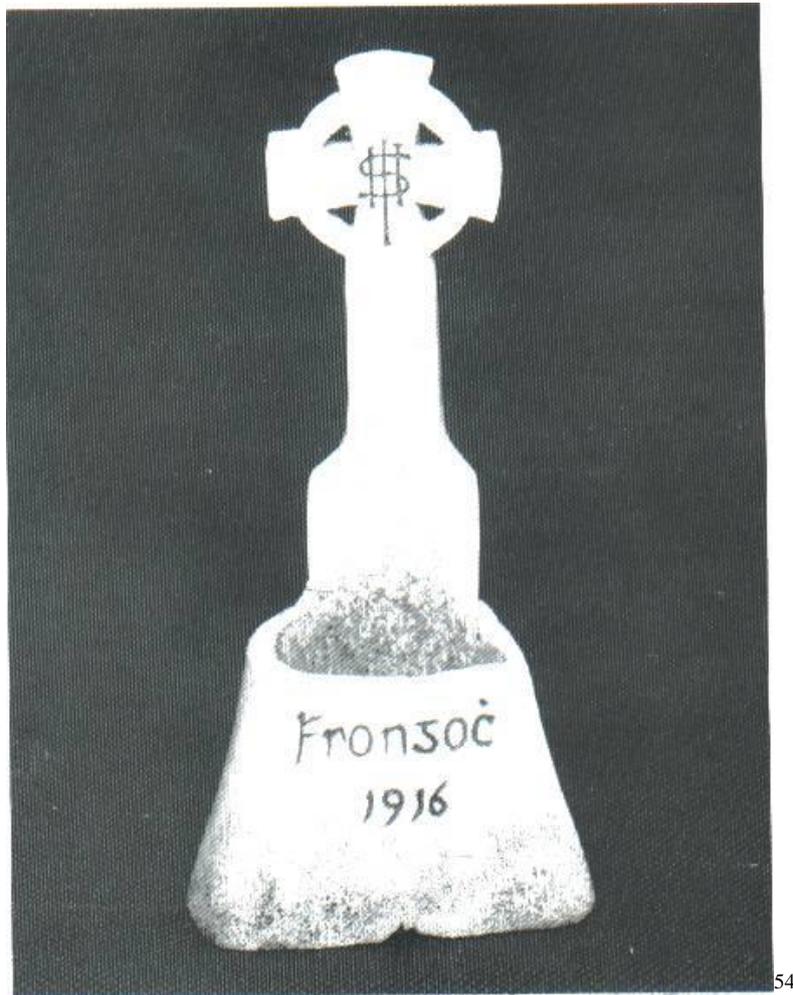


Plate 5: Holy water font.

<sup>52</sup> Teresa McCann interviewed by author, 3 May 2003.

<sup>53</sup> Niamh O'Sullivan, Archivist, Kilmainham Gaol Museum, in conversation with author, 18 Jan. 2003.

<sup>54</sup> O'Mahony, *Frongoch: University of revolution*, p. 91.

## Chapter 3

## The War of Independence

Jack McCann was released in December 1916. It is known that he and another Lusk volunteer, Dick Aungier, called to see Dan Sherry after their return from Frongoch just before Christmas.<sup>55</sup> They came home to a very different Ireland, a country that had seen nearly all of the leaders of the insurrection brought before a firing squad and shot dead. One of these, James Connolly, who had served as commander-in-chief during the rising, was so ill that he had to be tied to a chair before the firing squad could carry out its work. Nearly all the executions were carried out between 3-12 May 1916. The ordinary people of the country had seen this brutal savagery with their own eyes and were repulsed by what they saw. Even the foot soldiers of the Irish Volunteers were now seen in a different light. People began to think that maybe they were not the evil men the authorities made them out to be.<sup>56</sup> The authorities were judged to have acted with a very heavy hand indeed and in places such as Lusk, which had a high concentration of men involved in the rising, the feelings of revulsion towards the authorities were particularly strong. Most of the leaders of the rebellion were now gone and Thomas Ashe remained under lock and key in Pentonville Prison, but was later to be released during the general amnesty in 1917.<sup>57</sup>

The ordinary volunteers just wanted to lick their wounds and carry on with their lives as best that they could but they also needed to earn some money and most of them, like McCann, returned to their original employments. If their jobs were still open for them which in McCann's case it seems that it was.

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<sup>55</sup> Billy Sherry, Lusk, interviewed by author, 7 June 2003.

<sup>56</sup> Brian Barton, *From behind a closed door: secret court martial records of the 1916 Easter Rising* (Belfast, 2002), p. 90.

<sup>57</sup> O'Mahony, *The first hunger striker, Thomas Ashe 1917*, p. 17.

On 23 May 1917, Jack McCann married his sweetheart Annie Cosgrove, a Rush girl, at St Maur's Roman Catholic Chapel, Rush. The witnesses were Christopher McCann and Alice McCann and the officiating priest was Fr Lawrence O'Byrne, P.P.<sup>58</sup> As a wedding present 'Rover' received a gold fob watch with an inscription inside the cover 'On the occasion of your marriage, from your comrades in the Lusk Company of IRA'.<sup>59</sup> Afterwards, he left his home in Lusk to live with his new wife at her parent's home at Quay Lane, Rush. Annie's father was Thomas Cosgrove, a sailor and her mother was Mary Bissett.<sup>60</sup> Annie McCann was known around the harbour area of Rush as 'Little Annie' because there was another Annie Cosgrove in the town known as 'Big Annie'.<sup>61</sup>

In December 1917, Jack McCann started a new job as a labourer working for the roads department of Dublin County Council. This was a definite improvement on the type of work that he had been doing up to that point. Agricultural work was notoriously unpredictable and dependent on the weather and the time of the year and labourers were often laid off during the winter period when there was no work to be done. Labouring for the council was permanent and pensionable and was not subject to the variables associated with agricultural work. McCann was now in a better position to support his wife and plan for a family as well. He joined the Irish Transport and General Workers Union on 22 December 1917, probably through the influence of Lusk man Thomas Monks, who was branch secretary. An entry fee of 1s. 3d. was paid on his joining the union. Jack made his last payment on 20 November 1920, two days before his death.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Marriage certificate in possession of Teresa McCann, Skerries.

<sup>59</sup> Watch in possession of Dr Jack McCann, Galway.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Cosgrove, Rush, interviewed by author, 28 May 2003.

<sup>61</sup> Margaret McCann Moore, Rush, interviewed by author, 7 June 2003.

<sup>62</sup> Union card in possession of Teresa McCann, Skerries.

Rover and Annie's first child, Daniel, was born in Rush on 1 May 1918. The birth of a first baby is always a very special event in the lives of a husband and wife and the couple must have been over the moon with happiness. Everything was now clicking into place for them. Rover was now the proud father of a baby boy, his job prospects had improved immeasurably and he and his wife had everything to look forward to in the future. A second child, Thomas, arrived on 2 September 1919. Rover now had two sons to enjoy and by all accounts he was an excellent father and husband.<sup>63</sup>

The period from 1919 onwards proved a very difficult time for Ireland; it was the start of what is now called the War of Independence. After the IRA ambushed a party of R.I.C., at Soloheadbeg, county Limerick, killing two policemen, this caused the authorities to turn up the heat on the rebels and it was to bring hard times for republicans throughout the country. As the year wore on and the IRA flying columns were causing consternation among the members of the R.I.C., morale in the force began to crumble and, before long, resignations became the order of the day. The position for the authorities became untenable as they could not find new recruits to replace the loss of experienced policemen. Few would join the force as it was seen as a dangerous occupation since the IRA began to see them as legitimate targets.

It was during this difficult period that the authorities began assembling a force sourced in Britain from mainly ex- military men who were shipped to Ireland during the spring of 1920.<sup>64</sup> These were subsequently given the name 'Black and Tans', a derogatory name that was to become synonymous with fear, hatred and loathing. In the Fingal area the Black and Tans were based at Gormanston Military Camp, situated a number of kilometres to the north of Balbriggan. Before long the Black and Tans

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<sup>63</sup> Oral testimony of Teresa McCann, Skerries, 20 June 2003.

turned their attention towards those members of the community who were known to sympathise with the IRA and they took a special interest in men who had taken part in the Easter Rising of 1916, particularly those who had been imprisoned at that time. They started calling at the homes of these men late at night, sometimes accompanied by local policemen to show them the way, and their intentions were not good. As the year 1920 wore on the situation became ever more serious in Fingal and during September the Black and Tans over-stepped the mark and sacked Balbriggan, burned many buildings, dragged two Balbriggan men, James Lawless and John Gibbons, from their beds, tortured and killed them in cold blood.<sup>65</sup> Then in October it was the turn of Skerries to feel the pain and young Terry Sherlock, aged twenty-two years, lost his life in that town.<sup>66</sup> In Rush, things were still relatively quiet but the volunteers of that town were worried that the Black and Tans would soon turn their attention their way. They needed somewhere safe to shelter, rest and sleep. A vacant house at Lower Main Street, Rush, was made available by the Murray family who were sympathetic to their plight.<sup>67</sup> On first impressions it seems a somewhat odd choice for a refuge being so near the R.I.C., barracks but it seemed to work all right, at least for a time.

Rover McCann and Christopher 'Kit' Mackey among others used sleep on the floor of Murray's house and it provided a safe haven for them. However, it became unsafe after the Black and Tans started visiting Rush during their night time raids and the men could not stay there then for fear that they might call. There was a shed in Coyle's field, beside the stream on the road to Skerries, which was also sometimes

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<sup>64</sup> Military Archive, A/0415.

<sup>65</sup> Military Archive, *The last post*, details and stories of republican dead, 1913-1925.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Jimmy Murray, Rush, interviewed by author, 1 July 2003.

used.<sup>68</sup> Another hiding place used by men on the run was a field at the ‘Drummonds’ at Whitestown just outside Rush. They could not be caught by surprise there as the high ground afforded all-around visibility.<sup>69</sup> After the murders in Balbriggan and Skerries, the Rush volunteers had to keep to the fields and out-houses of the locality and constant vigilance was required. The Rush men were not entirely in the dark about the movements of the Black and Tans because local woman Cecilia McCann, who worked in a Balbriggan hosiery factory, used to bring news of what they were up to on her return to Rush at the weekend. She warned the Rush men to be on their guard but Rover used say that his wife Annie needed him near her then.<sup>70</sup>

While all this ducking and diving was going on in a bid to evade the Black and Tans on their nocturnal visits, Annie McCann was in the very late stages of her third pregnancy and this posed a terrible dilemma for her husband who wanted to be with her and found it very hard to stay away, especially at night. He was advised many times by his friends that he was taking a very big risk by spending time at his home. Two of those who warned him about the danger, were Patrick Weldon and Kit Mackey, fellow IRA men, but Rover took little notice and only stayed out occasionally.<sup>71</sup> Maybe Annie was having a difficult pregnancy but even if that was the case she was not on her own for her mother Mary was there to assist her, so if her husband had stayed away more often she should have been all right. Only he knew the reason why he took that risk and slept in his own bed instead of hiding out with the others. Maybe he thought that the Black and Tans would not be interested in an ordinary republican like himself and therefore that the risk was a small one. He was about to find out just how wrong that assumption was.

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<sup>68</sup> Tomas Hand, Milverton, Skerries, interviewed by author, 9 June 2003.

<sup>69</sup> Jimmy Butterly, Blake’s Cross, county Dublin, interviewed by author, 2 July 2003.

<sup>70</sup> Ceppie Weldon and her husband Moss, Rush, interviewed by author, 14 June 2003.

<sup>71</sup> Patrick Weldon, Rush, interviewed by author, 11 April 2003.

21 November 1920 became known as Bloody Sunday, after the military in Dublin city had forced an entry into Croke Park where a Gaelic football game was in progress. They opened fire from an armoured car and a number of spectators were killed that afternoon including one of the players on the pitch. This was a response to the murder of members of the detective unit of Dublin Castle's intelligence corps on the previous day by a shooting party directed by Michael Collins. Notwithstanding what was happening in the city, for Rover McCann it was just another Sunday to be enjoyed with his family. He had no inkling that this was to be his last day on earth. Darkness came early that day in November and as there was no street lighting in Rush in those days, once dusk came, people retired indoors for the night. The scene in the town was a peaceful one but this was a deceptive peace and not everyone was at ease with the quietness, particularly after the events in the city that weekend. One person who was very wary was Kit Mackey, a Rush man who ran a butchers shop with his brothers on Main Street. He was hiding out with other men that night but McCann was not among them. He had ignored the advice of Kit yet again and remained at home with his family.<sup>72</sup> His decision to stay at home that night was a serious mistake and one that would cost him dearly.

While the occupants of the Cosgrove household slept, Kit Mackey's fears were to become a reality when he saw the headlights of a Crossley tender turning left on Main Street and heading towards the harbour. He realised that their intention might be to call at Cosgrove's home at Quay Lane looking for Rover. Kit ran from the field where he and others were hiding out amongst the drills of cauliflowers and he ran

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<sup>72</sup> Oral testimony of Patrick Weldon, Rush, 13 Aug. 2003.

over the rough ground to try to warn him. However, he was too late as the Black and Tans beat him to it and he was forced to make a hasty retreat for his own safety.<sup>73</sup>

The Black and Tans, accompanied by a policeman, had arrived at Cosgrove's door by way of the town of Skerries where they had called at the home of labour representative P. Matthews and, having forced their way in, had shot him twice in front of his wife and daughter before leaving him for dead. Notwithstanding his grievous injuries, Doctor Healy, who lived close by, succeeded in pulling him through the danger period and he survived.<sup>74</sup> In Rush, the Black and Tans knocked on Cosgrove's door demanding entry. When the door was opened they pushed their way into the house and shouted for Rover to come down at once. As it was 2.30 in the morning he was in bed asleep but on hearing the commotion he called out that he would be down in a minute, whereupon one of the raiding parties said that he had better hurry up. When he came down the stairs he was quickly bundled outside. His mother-in-law, Mrs Cosgrove, pleaded with the raiders to let him go but they said that he was only being taken away for questioning. Rover told her that he would be all right, that they could do nothing, as nobody had anything on him. With those last words he was taken away into the darkness of Harford's field where he was murdered in cold blood and his body left there in the dark. Afterwards it was seen that two bullets had penetrated his heart.<sup>75</sup> Over the fields, fast asleep in her bedroom, little seven-year-old Margaret Harford was awoken by the gunshots. She looked out her window and saw the lights of the lorry outside Cosgrove's house and wondered what was going on. Later her mother told her what had happened and although Margaret is still living and is now a great age, she says that the memory of that night will never

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<sup>73</sup>Ceppie Weldon (nee Harford), Rush, interviewed by author, 14 June 2003; Teresa McCann, Skerries, interviewed by author, 15 June 2003.

<sup>74</sup>*Freeman's Journal*, 23 Nov. 1920.

<sup>75</sup>*Drogheda Independent*, 27 Nov. 1920.

leave her mind.<sup>76</sup> McCann's body was left dumped on the ground and the Black and Tans, with their work done, made their exit from the scene. When dawn came next morning four fishermen brought his body into the house where it was laid out so that his friends might visit and pay their respects. Fr Skehan attended and gave the last rites. The scene was one of utter misery with the occupants of the house huddled around the fireplace in their inconsolable grief. Many people called that day to offer their sympathy to the family.<sup>77</sup>

Rover McCann had taken a risk by staying at his wife's side during her pregnancy, ostensibly so he could help and comfort her, but he underestimated the risk that he was taking. This assumption is borne out by the words that he said to his mother-in-law just before his removal from the house. They could do nothing to him; there was nobody who could have anything against him. Mrs Cosgrove also seemed to believe that the police were only bringing her son-in-law for interrogation or possibly to prison. Thus there seemed to be a feeling within the family that the risk to him was one of imprisonment but not one of death. How wrong they were. The Black and Tans were not interested in taking prisoners as the deaths of Lawless and Gibbons in Balbriggan, in September, and Terry Sherlock and Thomas Hand in Skerries, in October and December respectively bear testimony.<sup>78</sup>

The question of informers sometimes arises after someone had been killed by the Black and Tans. However, this question is rarely capable of being answered much less proved. There are often stories about this or that person having assisted the police in some way or pointed a finger at the victim but rarely anything in the way of evidence. A newspaper report stated that Mrs Cosgrove recognised a voice spoken by

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<sup>76</sup>Margaret and William Halpin, Rush, interviewed by author, 5 Apr. 2003.

<sup>77</sup>*Drogheda Independent*, 27 Nov. 1920.

one of the raiding party as being that of a local policeman, although she did not name him.

The funeral of Jack McCann was entrusted into the care of local undertaker Joseph McGlew who ran his business a short distance from Cosgrove's home. He and Rover would formerly have been well acquainted with each other. McGlew was a carpenter and in common with many in that trade he made his own coffins in his workshop which was known locally as the 'coffin shed'. He made Rover's coffin there too.<sup>79</sup> The funeral probably took place on 23 November 1920, the second day after his death. His body was conveyed on a wooden bier carried at shoulder height by members of his family, friends and neighbours, and ably assisted by his IRA comrades from Rush and Lusk. When the funeral cortège, accompanied by the Rush Fife and drum band, reached the railway bridge near Lusk, it stopped momentarily to allow for an Irish tricolour flag to be draped over the coffin. The procession then continued on its way accompanied by the Lusk Black Raven pipe band to the old cemetery at Lusk village.<sup>80</sup> With regard to the actual burial itself few details are available as to what exactly happened at the cemetery. His IRA comrades may have been in attendance depending on whether or not there were any military in the vicinity in which case they may have stayed away. The rosary would have been recited in Irish in any event as was normal at the funeral of an Irish patriot; any other show of military honours may have been suspended as a precaution against R.I.C., intervention and the fear of possible arrests.

Only fifteen days after she had lost her husband, Annie McCann gave birth to her third baby, Sean. Still in deep shock from her bereavement she had to fight

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<sup>78</sup> Whearity Francis, *Thomas Hand (1878-1920)*, *Irish Volunteer*, Paper, No 221, talk given to Skerries Historical Society, 2001; Whearity Francis, *John Terry Sherlock (1897-1920)*, *Irish Volunteer*, Paper No. 228, talk given to Skerries Historical Society, 2002.

<sup>79</sup> Oral testimony of Margaret McCann Moore, Rush, 9 July 2003.

through her despair in order to bring forth a third child into the world. Her mind must have been in turmoil, the elation of the birth of her son tempered by grief over the loss of her husband. She was fortunate to have her parent's support during that terribly traumatic period in her life.

A board of inquiry was set up at Rush for the purpose of looking into the circumstances surrounding Rover's demise, and a death certificate bearing its conclusions was registered on the 24 December 1920. It stated that the cause of death was 'shock and haemorrhage due to gunshot wounds inflicted by a certain person or persons unknown, with intent to murder'.<sup>81</sup> The verdict was not a surprising one as it was a stock response regularly given by inquiry boards when deliberating on the deaths of republicans at the hands of the military, Black and Tans or otherwise. An answer such as that was a convenient way of covering up the true circumstances of the evil deeds carried out by the so-called police. These findings had no real bearing as to what really happened which in the case of Rover McCann was simply that he was murdered by Black and Tans in cold blood outside his own home.<sup>82</sup> These inquiry boards deliberated over the atrocities carried out by their own people and then issued bland verdicts to cover up their actions. There was no means of appealing the decision either. They made the rules and that was that.<sup>83</sup>

Two medals were issued to commemorate the involvement of Rover in the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence. The first (No.386) was awarded for his activities during Easter Week while the second medal (No.1029) also bears the name John McCann.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Pat and John Kelly, Lusk, interviewed by author, 6 July 2003.

<sup>81</sup> Death certificate in possession of Teresa McCann, Skerries.

<sup>82</sup> Military Archive, A/0415.

<sup>83</sup> Military Archive, A/0417.

<sup>84</sup> Medals in possession of Mary McAuley (nee McCann), Drogheda, county Louth.

### Conclusion

John Jack ‘Rover’ McCann lived in what are euphemistically referred to as ‘interesting times’. He grew up in the village of Lusk, county Dublin, a place that offered little in the way of steady employment opportunities for a young lad after leaving school. The census return for 1911 shows that he was already out working in the fields as an agricultural labourer when he was fourteen years old. By the standards of today this would be considered far too early for a young lad to be in full-time employment but it was not unusual for those times. Children had to contribute to the family income as soon as they left school. Boys went to agricultural work and girls usually went into domestic service, sometimes in big houses many miles from their homes.

Rover liked to play hurling to pass the time and is reputed to have been a good hurler who often played for his local team Round Towers G.A.A., Club. He was also involved with the Irish National Foresters and on special days the members would parade around the village in their colourful uniforms. From 1908 onwards, Lusk had come under the powerful influence of that legendary schoolteacher Thomas Ashe. It is impossible to underestimate the effect that the Kerry man held over the people of Lusk and its hinterland. Ashe was a fine specimen of a man and his talents were manifold. He could teach children to love learning and never a harsh word was spoken in his class. His musical skills were well known and his ability on the hurling field was second to none. All these virtues made it very difficult for anyone to dislike him and when he set up a volunteer company in 1914 in Lusk, many other local men joined with him. It was the natural thing to do at that time. It is unthinkable that Rover McCann should stand away from all this activity. He was known to be a

gregarious individual and would want to be involved in whatever was going on and particularly if Ashe was at the head of it.

Rover was with the Fingal ~~brigade~~ [Battalion] during Easter week 1916 when, under the command of Thomas Ashe, raids were carried out on R.I.C., barracks at Donabate, Swords and Garristown. In addition, attempts made to blow the bridge at Rogerstown on the Easter Monday. Rover was also there on Friday 28 April when the ~~brigade~~ [battalion] made history by taking on and defeating a much larger force of R.I.C., at the Rath Cross-roads near Ashbourne, county Meath, an event which became known as the 'battle of Ashbourne'. After the general surrender he was arrested and spent many months in British jails, remaining in Frongoch Prison camp until December 1916. While there he carved a bone into the shape of a holy water font which he later gave to his wife Annie and she in turn donated it to Kilmainham Jail Museum, where it is or was displayed.

Rover married Annie Cosgrove in Rush in 1917 and they had three sons, Daniel, Thomas and Sean. He went on the run during 1920 in order to avoid the attentions of the Black and Tans, an auxiliary force of the R.I.C. However, he spent more than an occasional night at home with his heavily pregnant wife and on the fateful night of 22 November 1920 he was captured at his home at Quay Lane, Rush, at 2.30 a.m., and taken out and murdered in cold blood. Fifteen days after his father's death, his third son, Sean, was born. Sadly he never got the chance to know his father. In later years two fine limestone memorials were erected in the towns of Lusk and Rush in his memory, a sign that he was held in the highest admiration by the local people for his bravery during those troubled times in Ireland's history in the early part of the last century. Although McCann was only a humble labourer, he lacked nothing in the bravery and courage department. He was there alongside more notable figures

like Thomas Ashe and Dick Mulcahy and he played a part in the Fingal brigade's [Battalion's] unstoppable charge through north county Dublin during that famous week in April 1916.

An indication of the respect in which Rover was held is gained from the documented remark of one of his comrades, John McAllister who said that 'he was the bravest man a country ever had'. One could not ask for a more fitting epitaph for a man who fought against an oppressor and who ultimately made the highest sacrifice by laying down his life for his country. In the area around Loughshinny, Lusk and Rush, whenever people think about that period in Ireland's history known as 'the troubles', they remember that they had one of their own represented in it, that man was John Jack 'Rover' McCann.

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