

# Creamery Attacks

## *Proinnsias Breathnach*

Creameries became a key target for reprisals by Crown forces in Ireland in 1920. Industrial units in which cream was separated from milk and churned into butter, creameries had become a key element in the rural economy in most dairying districts following their introduction to Ireland in the 1880s. These districts were mainly located in Munster and south Leinster and in a large region in the northern part of the island stretching from Sligo across to north Antrim.

Because of their large number of farmer suppliers, closure of creameries could have a major negative impact on the economy of surrounding areas. As farmers' sons were a major recruitment source for Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army (IRA), such closures were also seen as an effective way of undermining the latter's support base. Where creameries were co-operatively owned (which was mostly the case), rebuilding and re-equipment costs comprised an additional burden on members. While compensation for damage incurred could be sought from local authorities, the resulting cost had to be borne collectively by local taxpayers.

Creameries were also portrayed by the Crown forces as playing an important role in supporting the IRA. The daily gathering of suppliers delivering milk provided a convenient opportunity for facilitating meetings and information transfers. Creamery buildings themselves were seen as acting as meeting and hiding places and as locations for the storage of arms and documents.

One form of action against creameries was temporary closure; up to June 1921 thirty-three creameries had been subjected to this sanction. Other actions included threats against, and physical maltreatment of, creamery employees and suppliers; spoiling or removal of produce; damage to furnishings, equipment and buildings; and complete destruction of creamery premises by burning them to the ground.

A total of forty-eight creameries have been identified as having been the subject of attacks linked to Crown forces in 1920–21. Six of these sustained two attacks, giving a total of fifty-four attack incidents. To put this in perspective, in 1920 there were a total of 735 creameries in operation in Ireland. Thus, it is clear that the risk

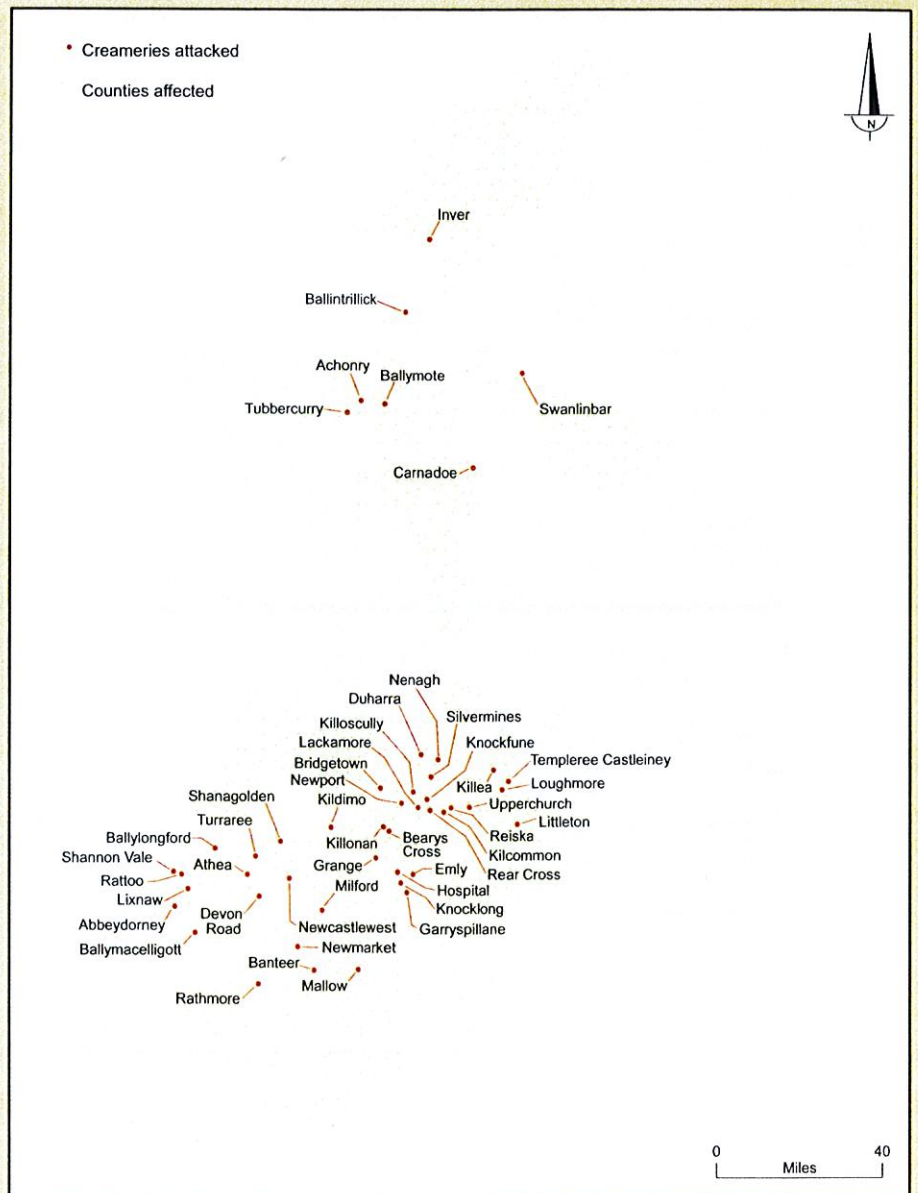


Fig. 1 Creameries destroyed by Crown forces, 1920–21. [Sources: *Irish Homestead*, 28 August 1920; Irish Creamery Managers' Association, *Annual Yearbook and Diary*, 1920–22; Dáil Éireann, *The Struggle of the Irish People: address to the Congress of the United States* (Dublin, 1921)]

of a creamery supplier being affected directly by an attack on their creamery was very low. Ten (21 per cent) of the creameries that were attacked were private (i.e. non-co-operative) concerns, compared with 37 per cent of all creameries, indicating that co-operative creameries were more likely to be subjected to attack.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1 shows that all but four of the attacked creameries were located in just five counties: Tipperary (16), Limerick (13), Kerry (7), Cork and Sligo (4 each), with single outliers in Donegal, Cavan, Roscommon and Clare. The very limited incidence of attacks in the northern dairying districts is particularly striking: only seven (3 per cent) of the 246 creameries in these districts were affected, and none at all in the counties that were to make up Northern Ireland. This reflects the comparatively low level of IRA activism in this part of Ireland.

At the same time, in Cork, which would have been considered a hotbed of resistance to British rule, only four creameries (out of a total of 111) experienced attacks. Furthermore, these were all located in the north of the county; in the centre and south-west,

where there was a dense distribution of creameries, there were no recorded attacks.

The concentration of attacks in the northern half of Tipperary is also notable. In the Golden Vale area around Tipperary town in the south-west of the county, where the density of dairy cows and creameries was the highest in the country, only one attack (at Emly) was recorded. There were no recorded attacks in Kilkenny, home to thirty-six creameries. Attacks in Limerick were more widely spread, while the concentration in north Kerry reflects the fact that most of the county's creameries were located in this area, which is much more fertile than the rest of the county. The creamery system was only weakly developed in Waterford and Clare.

#### TARGETING OF CREAMERIES

A feature of the geography of creamery attacks was a tendency for groups of creameries to be targeted together, usually in response to specific IRA actions. The first such event occurred over 9–10 April 1920, and involved six creameries in the Slieve Felim Hills of north-



Fig. 2 Members of the British Labour Party's commission set up 'to inquire into the whole question of "reprisals" and violence in Ireland' visiting the burnt-out co-operative creamery in Shanagolden, County Limerick. Responding to the British government's refusal to grant an independent inquiry into the violence in Ireland, the Labour Party went ahead and organised its own commission of inquiry. Its members left for Dublin on 30 November 1920 and began their work the following day. During the course of their investigations, evidence was gathered from witnesses and destroyed properties visited. Initially concentrating on key incidents in Dublin, including visits to Balbriggan, Skerries and Croke Park, the commission then extended its work by visiting the sites of reprisals in Cork, Kerry and Limerick. The commission travelled to the village of Shanagolden on 10 December 1920, where evidence was taken in relation to activities of the Black and Tans, including the destruction of the local co-operative, the burning of a house, the attempts to burn the local library (and another house and shop), the shooting dead of an elderly man, and the 'rough handling' of four young men in August 1920. The commission's final report was issued in London on 29 December 1920, and was damning in its assessment of the British government and its armed forces in Ireland: 'Terrorism and outrage on the part of members of the forces of the Crown in Ireland are condoned, defended and justified. Deeds of a similar character perpetrated by other people in Ireland are denounced by the men who gave their support to "reprisals", by "Black and Tans" and Auxiliary Police, as brutality, murder and assassination. The fact that men are alleged to be acting in support of law and order and under the authority of a government does not place them above the law. It does not elevate murder to the level of a virtue. Murder in cold blood, the callous and brutal treatment of innocent children, incendiarism, and theft are crimes and offences against the moral law, even when they are committed under the auspices of the British Empire and in the name of law and order. Sir Hamar Greenwood has applied the term "murder gang" to the "gunmen" of Ireland. The epithet can be applied to those individuals who, in the pay of the British government, kill people in cold blood.' [Source: Reproduced by kind permission of UCD Archives, P80/PH/19. See *Report of the Labour Commission to Ireland* (London, 1921)]

west Tipperary following the shooting of two policemen in that area on 9 April. The neighbouring creameries of Killonan and Beary's Cross in nearby east Limerick were attacked four days later, followed by Knocklong and Garryspillane in the south-east of the county on 25–26 July. The shooting of an RIC district inspector in Templemore on 17 August led to the burning of three creameries in the area as part of a general rampage on the part of security forces. The killing of another RIC district inspector in an ambush near Tubbercurry in County Sligo on 1 October resulted in the burning of creameries in that town and nearby Achonry. Two creameries in Athea, County Limerick were destroyed on 25 December.

In some cases creameries were caught up in general bouts of destruction visited by Crown forces on particular localities, as occurred in Newcastlewest, Mallow, Nenagh and Ballylongford. More normally, creameries were singled out for specific attack for reasons which were sometimes known and sometimes not. Undoubtedly the creamery attack with the most severe economic impact was that which occurred in Mallow on the night of 28 September 1920, following a spectacular IRA raid on the town's military barracks the previous day. The main casualty of the ensuing wave of destruction wrought by the military was the very large creamery and condensery operated by the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland (CMCI), which employed 150 people during the winter and more than twice that number during the summer high season.

This was just one of seven CMCI creameries subjected to attack during 1920. The CMCI was one of Ireland's largest industrial concerns, operating ninety creameries and several large condenseries throughout Munster and employing some 2,000 workers. Ironically, the firm's owners, the Limerick-based Cleeve family,

were staunch loyalists and had organised a fleet of trains to bring workers from their main factories to Dublin for the visit of King Edward VII in 1903.

It is clear that there was no centrally organised campaign of reprisals against creameries per se. Rather, there was a series of spontaneous attacks arising from local circumstances and facilitated by haphazard levels of discipline and supervisory control within the police and military forces (especially the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries).

#### CONDEMNATION

The creamery attacks were widely condemned in the Irish press and raised on a number of occasions in the House of Commons. The standard responses provided by Sir Hamar Greenwood, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, included that the attacks were justified where creameries were allegedly used as cover by ambushers, that the attacks were not the work of Crown forces, that there was insufficient evidence regarding who had carried out the attacks, and that the government was investigating the attacks. Calls by the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS), the umbrella group for Irish co-operatives, for a public inquiry into the attacks were turned down. There was a further irony here in that Sir Horace Plunkett, the IAOS president, was also a strong loyalist and former unionist Member of Parliament.

The first creamery attack occurred in April 1920, and attacks ceased after January 1921, apart from one final attack in May 1921 involving the burning of Rathmore creamery on the Kerry–Cork border following an ambush on an Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) patrol in the area. The same creamery was partially burned the previous July following an attack on the local RIC barracks.