**Vicious attempts by Catholics to drive out Protestants**

**A shameful period in 1935 saw attacks by Catholics against the Protestant community, says Tim Fanning**

By Tim Fanning

Sunday Independent

 February 22 2009

A SHORT-LIVED but vicious sectarian campaign carried out in July 1935 was designed to intimidate the Free State's minority Protestant population. The perpetrators of the attacks burnt down churches, fired shots at Protestant homes, smashed the windows of Protestant-owned businesses, sent threatening letters and painted sectarian slogans in villages. There were also calls for a boycott of both Protestant employers and employees.

Details of this outburst of sectarianism, which followed the worst anti-Catholic rioting in Belfast since the early Twenties, are contained in Department of Justice files released by the National Archives of Ireland to members of the public last week.

The worst disturbances occurred in Limerick city on the night of July 20 when a mob went on a four-hour rampage. The riot began when a man named Joseph Gibbons was arrested for smashing the window of a Protestant-owned hardware shop on William Street at 10.30pm.

Soon more than 600 locals were running through the city centre, smashing the windows of Protestant churches, businesses and private residences. The mob attacked guards protecting some of the main Protestant institutions in the city, such as the Masonic Hall and the Mission Halls, with stones and bottles. They then attempted to burn down the Presbyterian church.

While the attacks continued on the premises of Protestant traders in the city centre, the Garda detailed protection to the homes of Protestant families in the suburbs. Order was restored only in the early hours of the morning when armed soldiers were called as reinforcements.

"At one stage when O'Connell Street became congested, and the mob, which now numbered 600, were arming themselves with stones, timber poles, and other missles (sic) and it appeared to be the intention of the mob to break all Protestant business premises in the City, judging from their cries, 'We won't let a Protestant house standing.' It was then decided to invoke Military aid," the local inspector wrote in his report.

The following day in Kilmallock, also in Co Limerick, arsonists burnt the Church of Ireland building to the ground, causing damage costing thousands of pounds.

In Galway, dock workers -- members of the ATGWU -- marched through the town behind a fife and band, calling for a general strike of Catholic workers until all the Protestant employees of the city's factories had been dismissed. Many downed tools and joined the march.

When ESB workers refused to join the protest, there were angry confrontations -- and local guards, reinforced by members from neighbouring districts, baton-charged the strikers. Earlier during the day, at the docks, the strikers told the Protestant chief engineer of the SS Dun Aengus to leave the ship or it would not be allowed to sail.

In Thurles, Co Tipperary, a group of armed men fired shots at the houses of two local Protestants in the early hours of the morning.

The Garda report showed the men had fired 18 shots from a rifle at the house of Richard Pennifather, a local landowner. A quarter of an hour later, the armed men attacked the house of Pennifather's steward, Joseph Abercrombie. Twelve shots were fired this time, one of which came through the bedroom window where Abercrombie and his wife were sleeping.

The local Garda superintendent believed mercenary motives and a long-held grudge were behind the attacks.

"On the surface the motive would appear to be sectarian and the attacks to be a reprisal for incidents against Catholics in the North. This I believe to be merely a cover for the outrages, as in my opinion the real reason is prompted chiefly by agrarian motives actuated by blackguardism on the part of those whom we believe to be the principal suspects," wrote Supt Muldoon.

"Trouble of a similar nature was experienced by Mr Pennifather for some time beginning in 1922 when parties from Turraheen, a neighbouring area, gave considerable persecution which took the form of commandeering his cars, assaulting his house by firing shots into it, throwing stones etc, and generally creating such a state of affairs as in the opinion of the attackers would intimidate him so much that he would leave the area and that of course his farm would then be for division, with consequent benefit to those engaged in the persecution."

Sectarian slogans and notices and threatening letters were also used to intimidate Protestants. "Remember 21. Watch Belfast," was written in tar on the streets of Dunmanway, Co Cork. The "21" was a reference to the number of Protestants killed in the area during the Civil War, according to one newspaper report. [More likely the year 1921] Also in Dunmanway, the gardai suspected two young IRA men and a member of Cumann na mBan were sending threatening letters to two Protestant employees of the local Bank of Ireland.

The wave of sectarian intimidation was already dying down by the beginning of August, as a fragile peace slowly returned to Belfast.

The Garda implicated members of the IRA, Cumann na mBan and the Blueshirts in some of the incidents, but absolved the leadership of any political or religious organisation of responsibility. In other cases, drunken or youthful irresponsibility were said to have played a part.

The Catholic Church and the civil authorities, including the head of the government, Eamon de Valera, were quick to condemn the attacks. But in some cases, prominent Catholics attempted to thwart the prosecution of those responsible.

In Limerick, the local superintendent reported that the Lord Mayor and members of the Catholic clergy had "suggested to me that further investigation of these cases should be discontinued and that no further prosecutions should be instituted in respect of them.

"It was urged that further proceedings would tend to revive the bitterness and ill-feeling which have now died down." He added that he was "left with the impression that the Deputation intended to approach a higher Authority on the matter".

The superintendent also reported that a district court judge had expressed surprise to see another case relating to the riot before him and said that "further prosecutions would only tend to keep alive animosities that should be and, he believed, were long since dead".

In the case of the arson attack on Kilmallock church, the local superintendent believed there was "absolutely no hope of procuring a conviction before a Limerick County jury" after the accused were acquitted, and recommended they be returned for trial at the Central Criminal Court in Dublin.

But in many cases it was the attitude of the Protestant victims themselves that stymied the Garda investigation. In the case of the threatening letters sent to the bank employees in Dunmanway, the local gardai believed they would not "be able to bring the culprits to justice in this case owing to the attitude of the injured parties and the Protestant community generally endeavouring to hush the matter up.

"They are of the opinion that the solving of this crime would start trouble and create a split between them and their Catholic neighbours which would last for years."

This reticence to stand up to the local Catholic bullies was to become an understandable, if regrettable, feature of the rural Protestant experience south of the border.

Tim Fanning has just completed a book on the 1957 Fethard-on-Sea boycott