

# Cork: A City Burned - A City Reborn



**1920** was a year book-ended by great hope and great despair in Cork city.



Photos courtesy of  
Cork Public Museum

From a beginning when the goal of Irish independence was within reach and the city's republican leaders took charge of local politics...

... through the tragic deaths of Cork's first republican Lords Mayor – by murder and hunger-strike – as the world watched in horror, and citizens went about their business in fear and trepidation...

... to a final few months of increasing violence by republican and British Crown forces, then a campaign of arson attacks against nationalist targets...

... and, finally, the worst reprisal attack of the War of Independence that saw Cork city's commercial hub and civic heart reduced to smouldering ruins in a few short hours of devastating destruction.

This exhibition will take you through the story of those tragic events.

But it will also show how the spirit and determination of Cork and its people helped the beautiful city rise from the ashes and return to its former glory.



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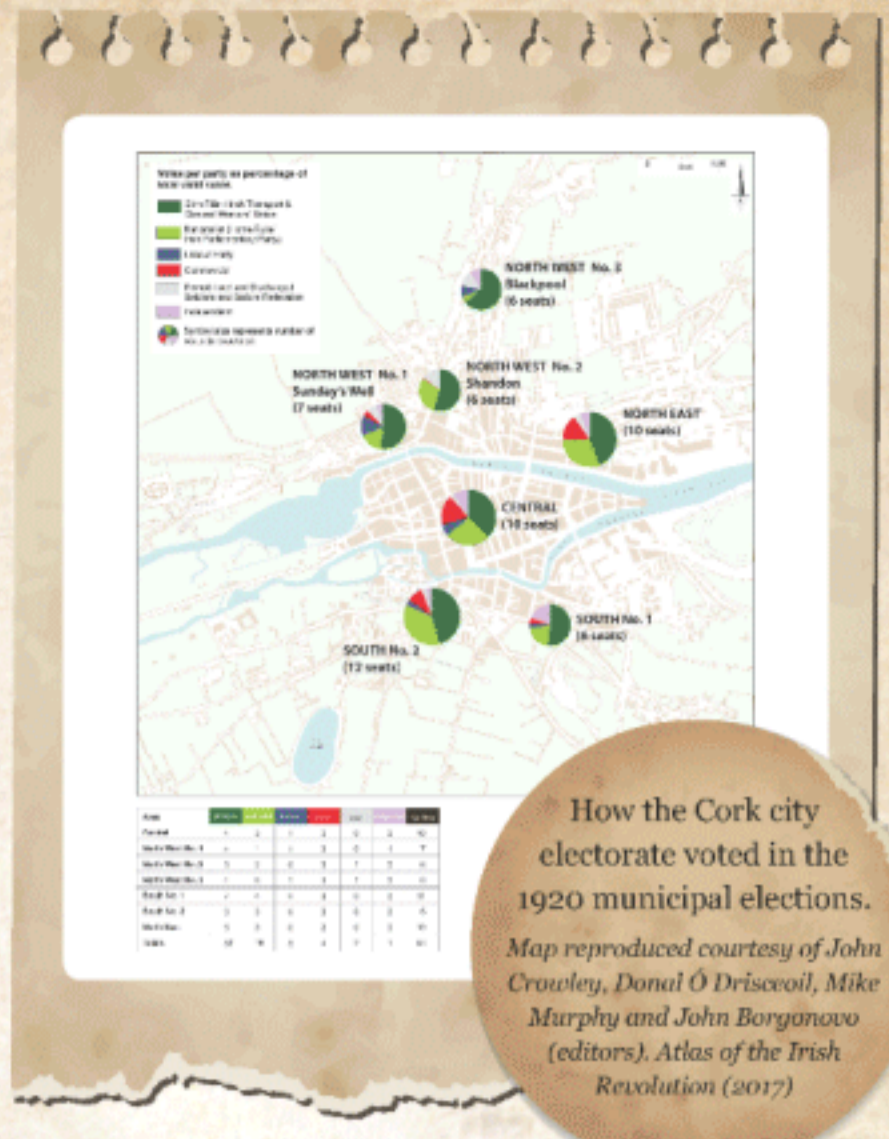
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Please follow the numbering system to work your way through the exhibition.

The year 1920 began with the control of local government being lost by the British administration in Ireland.

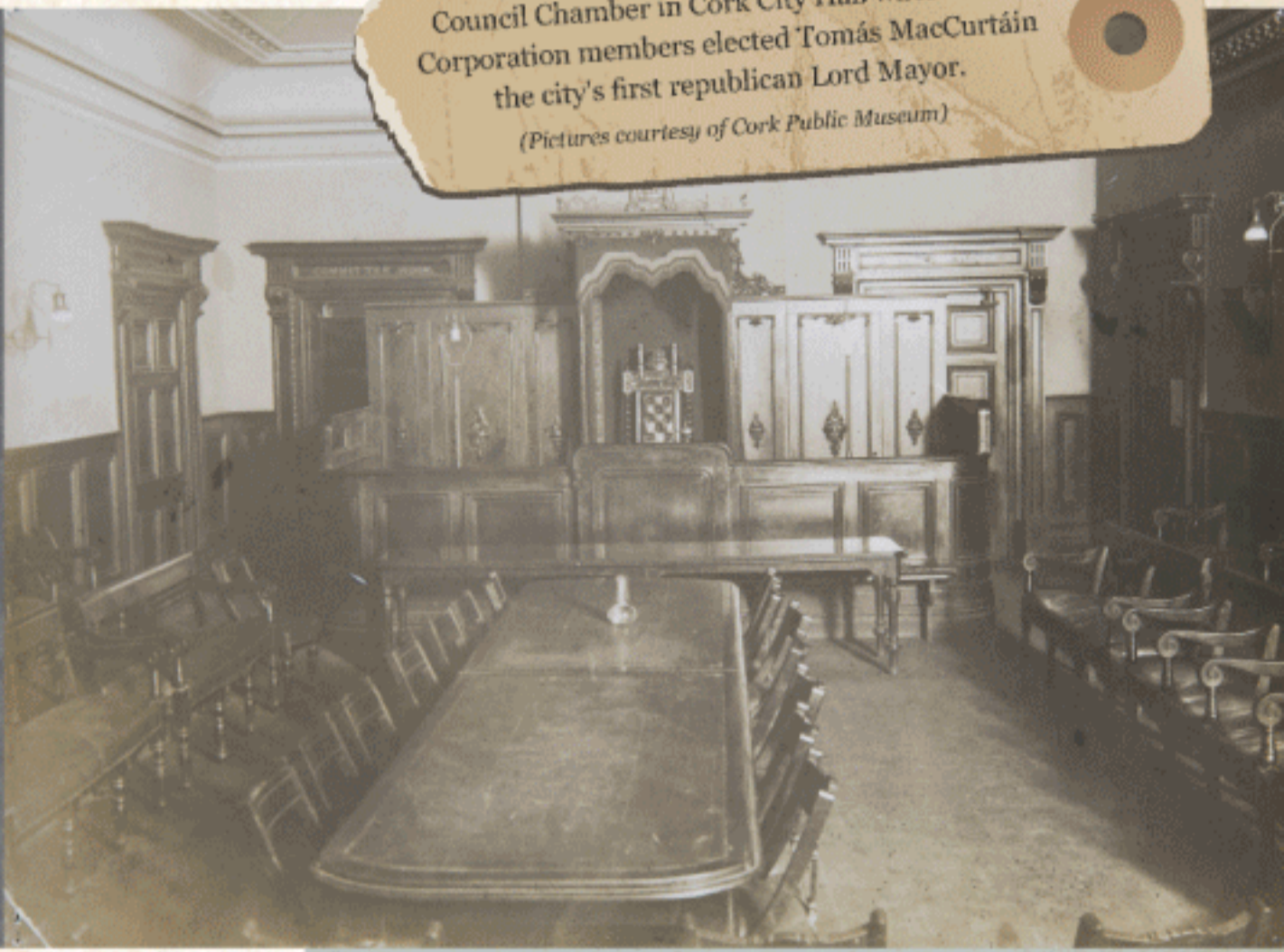
In the December 1918 general election, most Irish constituencies had returned Sinn Féin candidates, who then formed the first Dáil Éireann in January 1919. The republican party also dominated urban local elections held in January 1920, except in the north-east of Ireland.

Ahead of the Cork Corporation election, Sinn Féin entered an alliance with the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU). This helped them gain control of the council in Ireland's first elections using the proportional representation voting system.



How the Cork city electorate voted in the 1920 municipal elections. Map reproduced courtesy of John Crowley, Donal Ó Drisceoil, Mike Murphy and John Boryanovo (editors). *Atlas of the Irish Revolution* (2017)

Council Chamber in Cork City Hall where Cork Corporation members elected Tomás MacCurtáin the city's first republican Lord Mayor. (Pictures courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



Cork Corporation's formal recognition of the revolutionary government was notified to the Dáil in this June 1920 letter. (Courtesy of Cork City and County Archives Service)

On January 30, 1920, Tomás MacCurtáin's fellow councillors unanimously elected him as Lord Mayor. The Blackpool businessman - who was also Officer-Commanding the Cork No. 1 Brigade of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) - successfully proposed a motion that would be adopted in varying forms over the following months by councils around the country:

"That this Council of the County Borough of Cork... hereby records its recognition of Dáil Éireann as the lawful, legal and Constitutional Parliament of the Irish Nation, and recognises the Executive of the Dáil as the lawful Government of this country."

With the operations of Dáil Éireann's revolutionary government beginning to slowly take effect, citizens who believed in Irish independence might understandably have felt the future was bright.



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Tomás and Éibhlís MacCurtáin and their children soon before he was killed at their home in Blackpool on March 20, 1920.

As 1920 progressed, attacks by MacCurtáin's IRA Mid-Cork Brigade against rural barracks of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) increased in number and ferocity as the Dáil-controlled military force sought to capture police weapons.

In the city, shootings and deaths on the street became commonplace as RIC constables and officers were targeted.

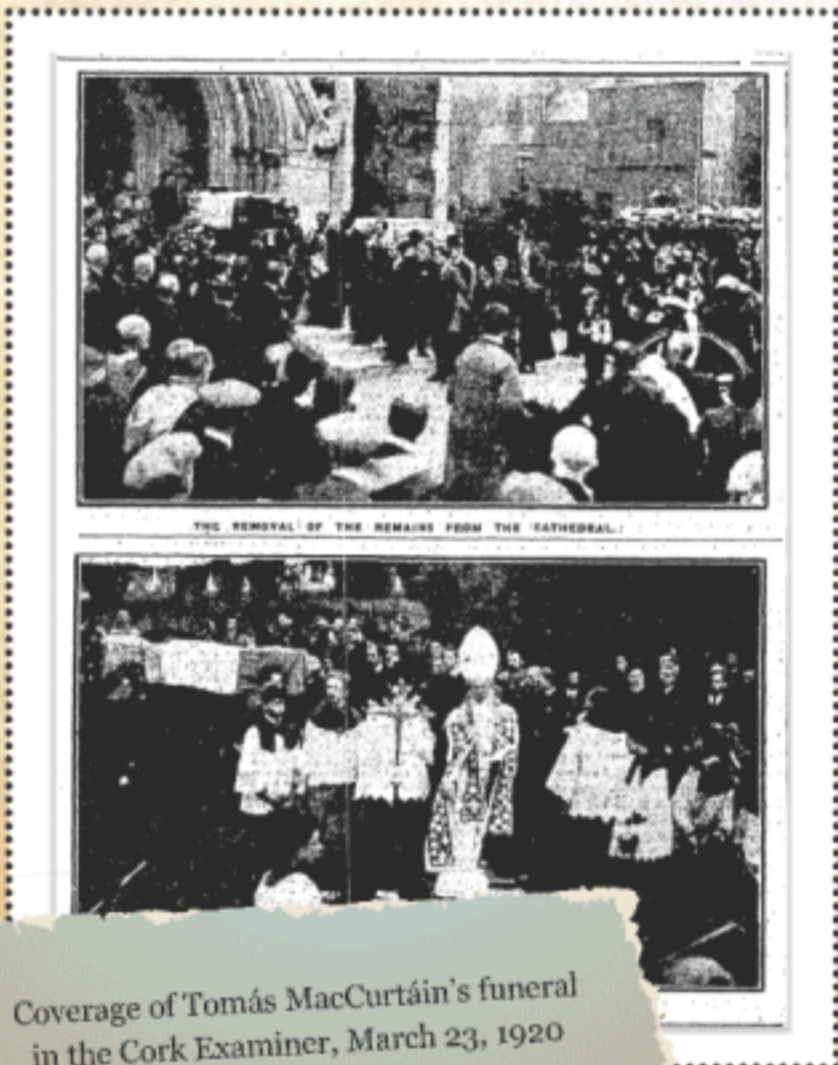
In the early hours of his 36th birthday, March 20, 1920, Tomás MacCurtáin's home in Blackpool was raided by disguised policemen. In front of his pregnant wife Éibhlís, they shot the Lord Mayor of Cork and he died of his wounds.

The world's press reported on the outrage from Cork, sending photos and newsreels of the impressive funeral procession around the globe. An inquest jury pointed the finger of blame firmly at senior RIC officers and to the very top of the British government, Prime Minister David Lloyd George.

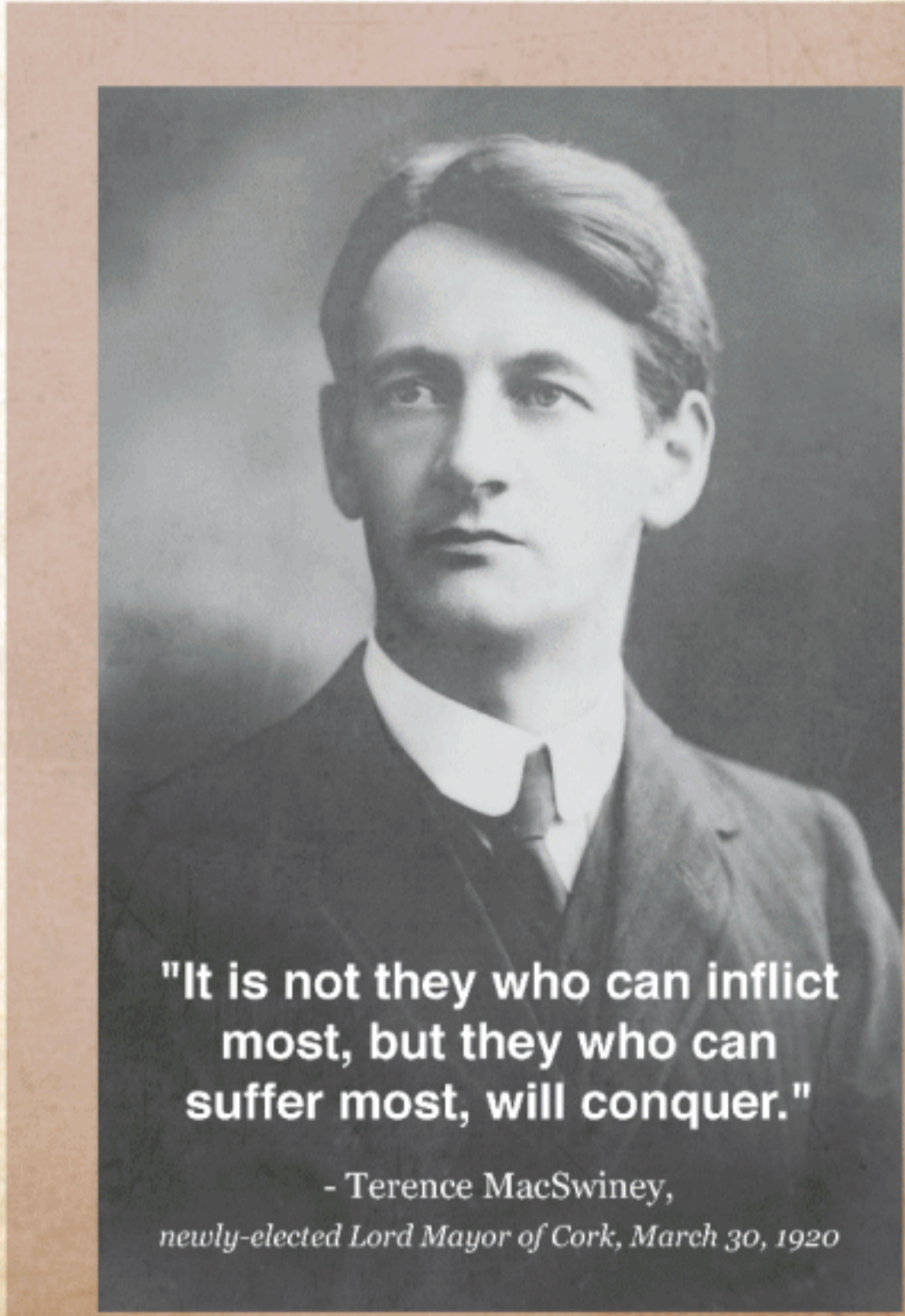
MacCurtáin was succeeded as Lord Mayor and as O/C IRA Cork No. 1 Brigade by his friend Terence MacSwiney, a member of Dáil Éireann for Mid-Cork.



MacCurtáin's 'wilful murder' (as described by the inquest jury) was avenged on August 22, 1920, when former Cork RIC District Inspector Oswald Swanzy was shot dead in Lisburn, Co Antrim. The IRA party responsible included members of the Cork No. 1 Brigade using this revolver, previously owned by their former commander.  
*(Courtesy of Independence Museum Kilmurry)*



Coverage of Tomás MacCurtáin's funeral in the Cork Examiner, March 23, 1920



- Terence MacSwiney, newly-elected Lord Mayor of Cork, March 30, 1920

*Courtesy of Cork Public Museum*



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Crowds gathered on the morning of July 13, 1920 to see the burned-out remains of King Street RIC Barracks after it was burned by the IRA the night before.

*(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)*

The summer of 1920 saw the military and political battle for control of Ireland - and of Cork - gather pace rapidly.

The King Street (recently renamed MacCurtain Street) RIC barracks - from which men involved in the Lord Mayor's killing in March had departed - was set ablaze by the IRA in July 1920. Outside the city, large areas of Co. Cork were under republican control as the RIC abandoned most barracks outside of large towns. By August, around half of the country's police stations were abandoned.

Killings on both sides of the conflict intensified in Cork city and county during the second half of 1920.

Summer 1920 also saw the British justice system in Ireland almost entirely collapse. While police found it difficult to operate under threat of IRA violence, Dáil Éireann set up its own system of Parish Courts and District Courts.

While the criminal sessions scheduled at the city's courthouse on Washington Street in July 1920 had to be protected by RIC and British soldiers, the council chamber at Cork City Hall was busy hearing cases of the Dáil District Court.



*(Photos courtesy of Cork Public Museum)*

### BURNING OF "KING ST." R.I.C. BARRACK



*Cork Examiner, July 14, 1920.*



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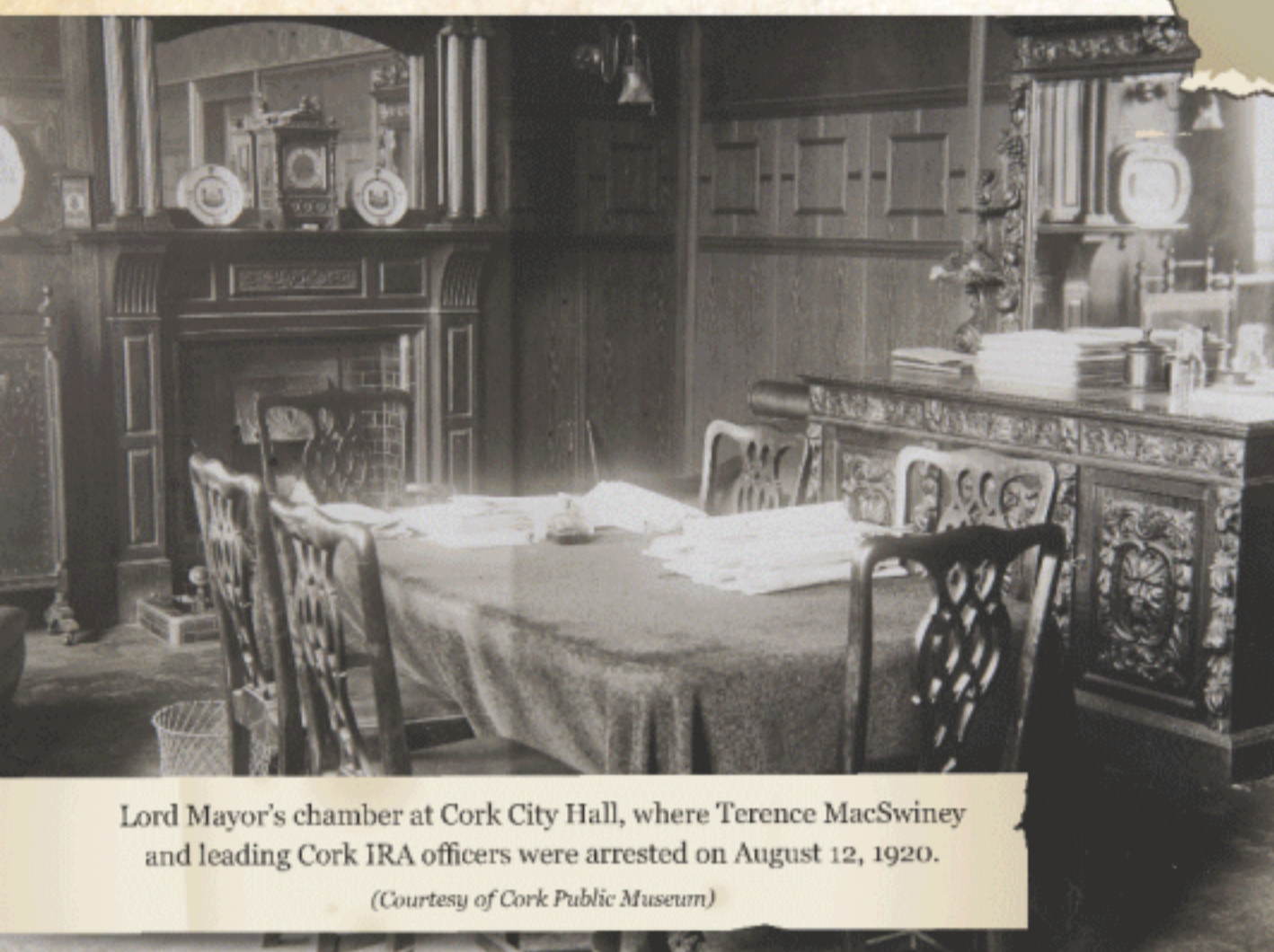
# The arrest of Cork's Lord Mayor Terence MacSwiney on August 12, 1920 began one of the most documented and tragic episodes of the Irish War of Independence.

At a court-martial in Victoria Barracks (Collins Barracks today), he was sentenced to two years for possession of a cipher used by the IRA to decode intercepted police communications.

MacSwiney told the military officers he would decide how long he spent in jail, rather than them. He had begun a hunger strike, joining with that begun by republican prisoners in Cork Men's Prison, and declared: *"I shall be free, alive or dead, within a month."*



Postcard commemorating Terence MacSwiney TD, Lord Mayor of Cork, after his death on hunger strike on October 25, 1920  
(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



Lord Mayor's chamber at Cork City Hall, where Terence MacSwiney and leading Cork IRA officers were arrested on August 12, 1920.  
(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



Crowds watch the coffin of Lord Mayor Terence MacSwiney TD being carried through St Patrick's Street as the funeral procession travelled from the North Cathedral to the Republican plot at St Finbarr's Cemetery.  
(Courtesy of Michael Lenihan)

He was soon transferred to London, where his personal determination, public uncertainty about his fate and regular updates from his family caused international journalists and London's Irish diaspora to make a daily pilgrimage of pressmen and prayer to Brixton Prison.

The hunger strike in Cork Men's Prison continued in parallel, leading to the death of Fermoy IRA officer Michael Fitzgerald on October 17 and young IRA Volunteer Joseph Murphy on October 25, 1920.

Hours before Murphy died, Cork's Lord Mayor, Mid-Cork TD and IRA Cork No. 1 Brigade Commandant Terence MacSwiney passed his last breath in jail in London after 74 days on hunger strike. He left a 28-year-old wife Muriel grieving, and their two-year-old daughter Máire fatherless.

His death and the funerals held for him in London, Dublin - where his remains were originally to have been shipped - and his native Cork drew huge international press attention. The propaganda spectacle brought global sympathy to the cause of the Irish Republic and drew criticism of the British Government's actions in Ireland.



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Terence MacSwiney was replaced as Lord Mayor of Cork by Donal Óg Ó Callaghan, who fled to the United States of America in fear for his life. While there, he gave evidence to the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland alongside Muriel MacSwiney, widow of his predecessor, and Terence's sister Mary MacSwiney.

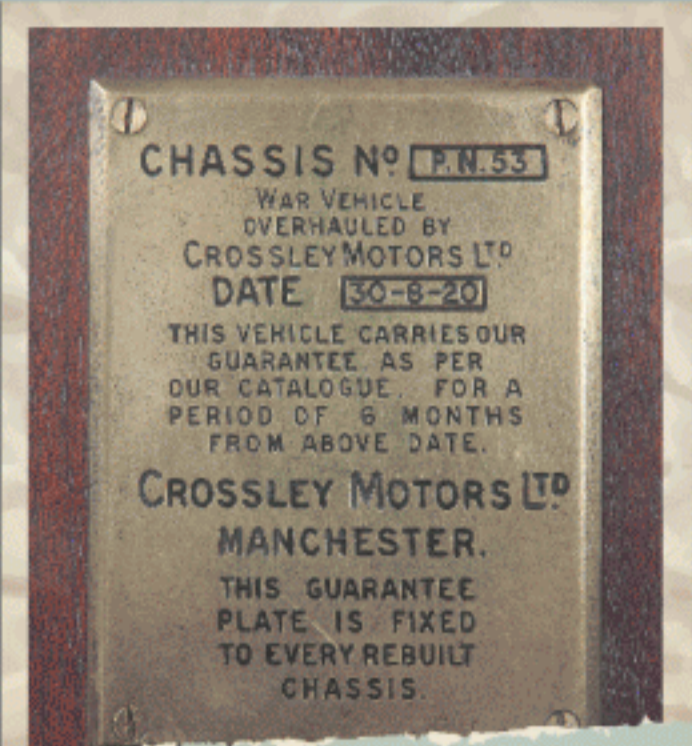
Sean O'Hegarty took over command of the IRA's Cork No. 1 Brigade, which had already stepped up operations during MacSwiney's final imprisonment. These included an unsuccessful attempt in September 1920 to capture Major-General Sir Peter Strickland - the British Army's most senior local officer - from his motor car on St Patrick's Hill, in hope of holding him hostage to secure Terence MacSwiney's release.

The summer of 1920 saw night-time curfews introduced in the city, which was patrolled by soldiers from 10pm to 3am. It also saw the deployment throughout Cork of the latest addition to British efforts to police Ireland. The 'Black and Tans' and the RIC Auxiliary Division were composed mostly of former British soldiers, the latter comprising those of the officer classes. They soon gained a reputation for public disorder, brutality against women and families during raids on homes, and drunken reprisals against people and property for IRA ambushes and killings.



Memorial cross originally used at Kilmichael ambush site, naming the three IRA Volunteers killed - Michael McCarthy, Pat Deasy and Jim O'Sullivan.

*(Courtesy of Independence Museum Kilmurry)*



A Crossley Motors guarantee plate from one of the Auxiliaries' lorries attacked in the Kilmichael ambush.

*(Courtesy of Independence Museum Kilmurry)*



Muriel and Mary MacSwiney, widow and sister, respectively, of Terence MacSwiney travelled to the United States within weeks of his death to detail his imprisonment and conditions in Ireland.

*(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)*

Between MacSwiney's arrest in mid-August and the end of November 1920, more than 80 people died violently around Cork. They included dozens who lost their lives in Cork city - civilians, Crown Forces and members of the IRA.

By far the biggest loss of life occurred on Sunday, November 28, 1920, when the IRA Cork No. 3 Brigade's Flying Column ambushed a convoy of RIC Auxiliaries at Kilmichael, between Macroom and Dunmanway. It resulted in the deaths of 17 Auxiliaries and three members of Tom Barry's IRA Flying Column in the deadliest single event of the War of Independence.

Heavily-armed members of the RIC Auxiliaries and Black & Tans outside RIC headquarters in Cork city at Union Quay.

*(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)*



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The fires that ravaged the city centre on the night of December 11 and 12 were not the first to devastate local businesses during the War of Independence. Over the previous six weeks, crews of Cork City Fire Brigade dealt with incendiary fires at several commercial premises, many with republican links, and buildings used by local Sinn Féin clubs. In some cases, armed and masked men wearing macintosh coats had evacuated the occupants beforehand. Their attire was similar to that of the gang of policemen who raided the MacCurtáin home in March. Similar groups were responsible for attacks on IRA members or suspected republicans in the final months of 1920.

The occupants of some premises that were subsequently set ablaze had received written warnings, such as the following note posted to tenants at 53 North Main Street, above the pub of Edward O'Connell:

**FINAL WARNING**

*You are hereby notified to evacuate the premises herein mentioned, viz., 53 North Main Street, Cork. Ignore this note, and you take the consequences. Policemen and soldiers are being murdered every day, and their barracks blown up without one word of protest from any section in Cork with the exception of the loyal population.*

*Signed. B. and T.  
God Save the King*

The signature alluding to the Black and Tans was a variation on similar sign-offs to such threatening notices being circulated directly to republican sympathisers and placed in local newspapers. They were most likely written by local police or other members of the Crown Forces, under the guise of a so-called 'Anti-Sinn Féin Society', to warn of reprisals for escalating deadly IRA attacks on their colleagues.

A similar warning was addressed to tenants of the adjoining building, living above Mr McGurk's Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe and a Sinn Féin club at 54 North Main Street. Both buildings were destroyed by fire in the early hours of Saturday, November 27, 1920.



The American Shoe Company at 45 St Patrick's Street was one of several businesses between Marlboro Street and Princes Street junctions ruined by fires in the early hours of Sunday, November 28, 1920.  
*(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)*



Firemen dealing with the aftermath of the previous night's fire at Cahill's drapers', 47 St Patrick's Street (on the corner with Princes Street) on Sunday, November 28, 1920.  
*(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)*

**Incendiary fires dealt with by Cork Fire Brigade  
November - December 1920**



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Bullet damage to the clock tower at Cork City Hall prior to the Burning of Cork.  
(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



Fire damage was evident on the front and right side of Cork City Hall in the weeks before it was destroyed. The soldiers and armoured car on the quay outside were regular sights on Cork streets at this period.  
(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)

Cork City Hall was twice attacked in the weeks before it was eventually destroyed by fire. Like the offices of many Republican-controlled councils, it was the subject of regular military and police raids for Sinn Féin, Dáil Éireann and IRA documents.

On October 9, offices on the western side of the City Hall were damaged by fire when bombs were thrown through windows. Rifles were also fired from the street outside, very close to the city's RIC headquarters at Union Quay. Firemen reported being shot at from across the River Lee while attending the scene.

In the early hours of Tuesday, November 30, the day after word of the Kilmichael ambush reached Cork, the City Hall was one of three buildings with republican associations hit by arson. As firemen dealt with a blaze at the Sinn Féin club on Charlotte Quay, they were notified of another fire at City Hall. While it was being dealt with, they were called to a fire at the jewellery and silversmith business of Sinn Féin councillor Barry Egan on St Patrick's Street. Fire crews returned to a fresh outbreak at City Hall, where colleagues hosing down the first fire had been threatened with revolvers by armed men.

### Mace of the University College, Cork.



Made in our Factory in Solid Silver and Enamels to the Order of Sir Bertram Windle, President.

The following is a List of Pieces recently finished, or in course of Manufacture in our Workshops.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| Gold Chalice and Silver Gilt Ciborium<br>For BISHOP OF DROMORE. | Solid Silver Irish Loving Cup<br>For H.M. KING GEORGE V., Presented to Cork City Regatta |
| Gold Chalice<br>For CANON M. MAHON, NENAGH.                     | Solid Silver Yachting Cup<br>For LORD BARRYMORE.   |
| Solid Silver Sanctuary Lamp<br>For ST. PETER'S CHURCH, BELFAST. | Solid Silver Hurling Cup<br>For MOST REV. DR. HARTY, Archbishop of Cashel.               |
| Solid Silver Monstrance<br>For FR. CROFTS, O.P., DROGHEDA.      |  |

Makers of  
**CELTIC BOWLS. TEA & COFFEE SETS. IRISH POTATO RINGS.**  
PRIZES & TROPHIES. PRESENTATION SETS. COMPETITION SHIELDS, &c., &c.  
*Old Silver Pieces Copied and Faithfully Reproduced to Order.*

Silver Factory—6 MAYLOR ST., CORK.  
**Wm. EGAN & SONS, LIMITED, and Silversmiths,**  
Ecclesiastical Warehousemen,  
**32 PATRICK STREET, CORK.**

A 1919 advertisement for Egan's jewellers, damaged by fire on November 30, 1920.

### DWYER & CO. Ltd. CORK.



Wholesale Warehousemen :: Manufacturers of Hosiery, Shirts, Underclothing, and Quilts.

Businesses subjected to fire attacks included Dwyer & Co's Washington Street warehouse (facing the courthouse) in the early hours of Sunday, November 21, 1920. Raiders cleared a case of gold and silver watches before material for suits and dresses was covered in petrol and set alight. A bomb was also thrown through a front window.

The firm was raided around this period by British soldiers and police searching for shirt-cutter Michael Baylor, a wanted IRA gunman. He evaded arrest but an officer of his northside IRA company Sean O'Donoghue, a clerk at the same firm, was briefly detained and then released.



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# Martial Law

Leaving aside the Burning of Cork, the second weekend of December 1920 brought difficult developments for the republican cause in the city.

On Saturday, December 11, citizens read in local newspapers of the decision in London to place the 800,000 citizens of counties Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary under Martial Law. The British Army were given extraordinary powers to limit people's movements, close roads and fairs, insist on households keeping a list of all occupants, and authority to carry out attacks on homes in areas where IRA ambushes took place. While such official reprisals had not yet been experienced, Middleton in east Cork would be the first town in Ireland to suffer such a sanctioned military reprisal on January 1, 1921.

The city, however, was to endure a far more serious reprisal attack that very same night at the hands of men entrusted with local law enforcement.



A 'Death or Victory League' notice inserted alongside news of Martial Law in the Cork Examiner, Saturday, December 11, 1920 – the morning before Cork city centre was set ablaze.

# Excommunication

Perhaps more surprising than the imposition of Martial Law was the warning by Catholic Bishop of Cork Daniel Cohalan on Sunday morning, December 12 – as the city still smouldered - of excommunication for anyone engaged in ambushes, kidnapping, attempted murder or arson.

He condemned both sides in the ongoing tit-for-tat of murders and reprisals. But his excommunication decree was strongly aimed at the mostly-Catholic membership of the IRA and those supporting them. Bishop Cohalan had not previously been entirely unsympathetic to the republican cause. He had visited the Lord Mayor Terence MacSwiney – who was also an IRA commander - during his hunger strike at Brixton Prison.

But, he told parishioners at the North Cathedral, it is the duty of a Bishop to denounce murder and arson, whoever is responsible: "It is all very well to talk grandiloquently of the city being under the care and solicitude of the Republican Army. The city is nearly a ruin, and the ruin followed on the murderous ambush at Dillon's Cross."

As Chaplain to the IRA Cork No. 1 Brigade, Fr Dominic O'Connor - the Capuchin friar who had ministered to Terence MacSwiney on hunger strike – assured local IRA members that actions in defense of the Irish Republic and its citizens were justified; and so, he said, the excommunication decree would not apply to them.



Bishop Daniel Cohalan, Catholic Bishop of Cork, issued excommunication decree at Mass the morning after Burning of Cork. (Courtesy of Irish Examiner)



Cork's North Cathedral, where Catholic Bishop Daniel Cohalan delivered an excommunication decree. (Courtesy of Niall Murray)



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## The Barracks, Cork.

Victoria Barracks, Cork, in a postcard sent home to England by a British soldier in 1915. As well as accommodating the Auxiliaries 'K' Company in December 1920, the barracks had been base for thousands of soldiers with various British Army regiments across the centuries.

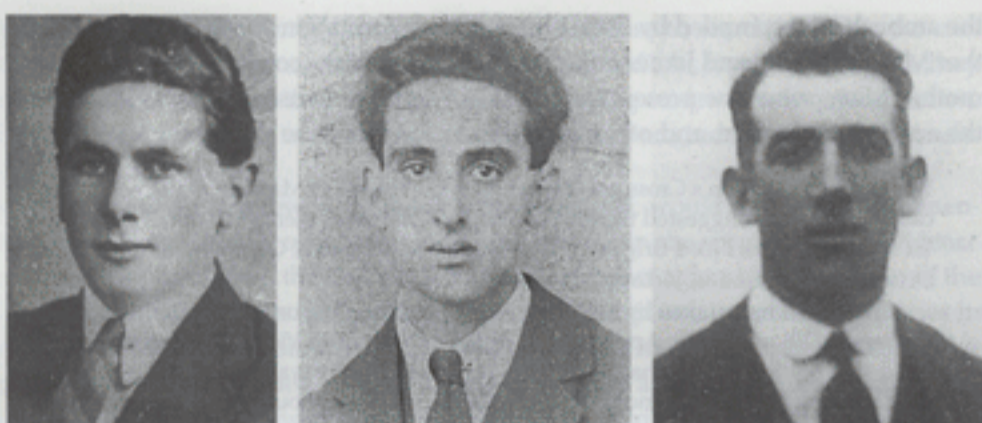
(Courtesy of Niall Murray)

The Dillon's Cross Ambush which Bishop Cohalan spoke of in his homily that Sunday had happened around 8pm the night before. Like many IRA actions, it was based on significant planning but its execution was last-minute and under-resourced.

The six volunteers who assembled behind a wall on Old Youghal Road near Dillon's Cross included Dwyer & Co employees Michael Baylor and Sean O'Donoghue.

Their comrade Michael Kenny stepped into the road in military-style clothing to stop two oncoming lorries of RIC Auxiliaries travelling to the city - a tactic similar to that adopted by Tom Barry at Kilmichael. The remaining IRA men began to throw small bombs or grenades at the vehicles and a shootout quickly started.

The engagement did not last long but it left 13 members of the Auxiliaries 'K' Company wounded, just a few hundred yards from their base at Victoria Barracks. One of them, Spencer Chapman, died of his injuries. The attackers ran off through The Glen, some of them going as far as the Delaney farmhouse at Dublin Hill to hide their weapons and unused grenades.



Capt. Seán O'Donoghue

Michael Baylor

James O'Mahony



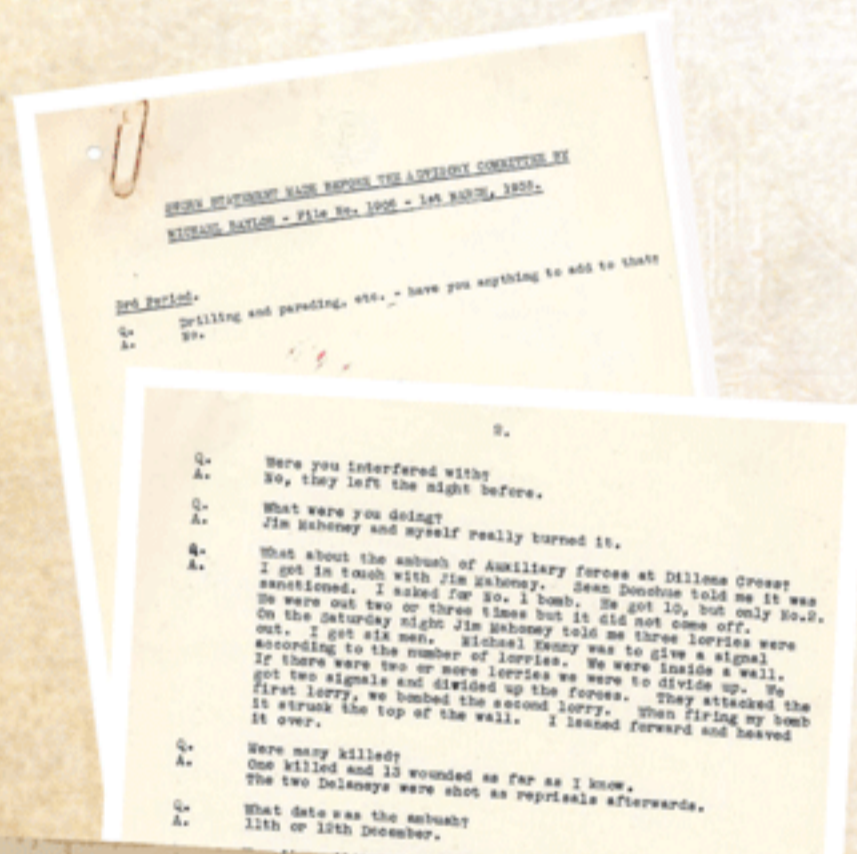
Augustine O'Leary

Seán Healy

Michael Kenny

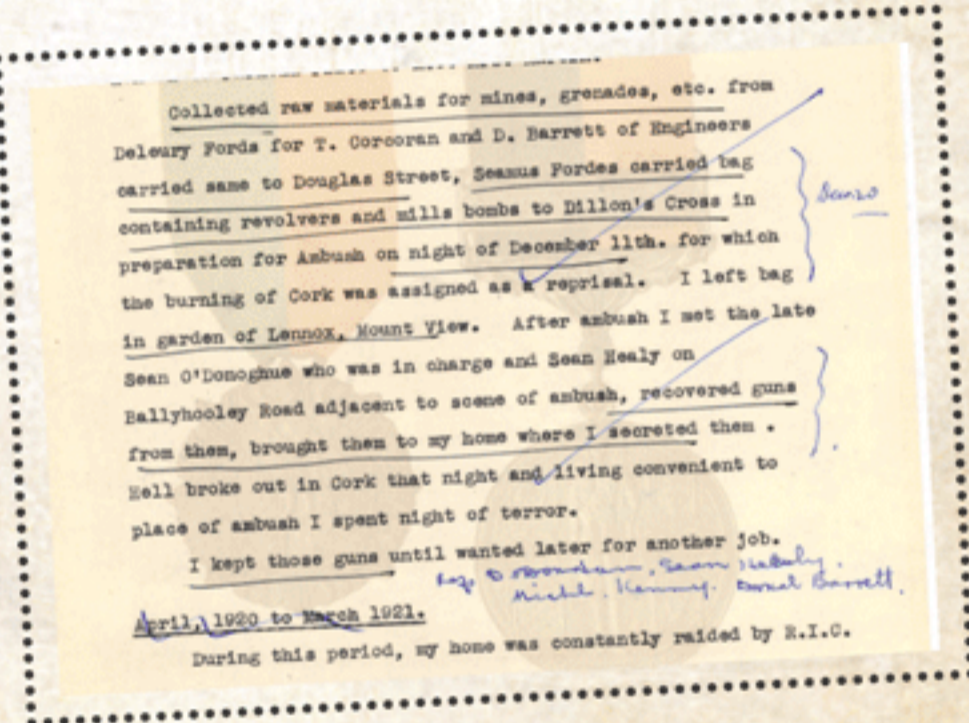
IRA members who took part in the Dillon's Cross ambush. The bombs they used were brought to the ambush site by local Cumann na mBan member Anne Barry.

(Reproduced from Dan Harvey & Gerry White, *The Barracks: A History of Victoria/Collins Barracks, Cork*)



Michael Baylor's evidence in 1935 about his role in the Dillon's Cross Ambush, as provided to a Department of Defence Advisor Committee considering his application for a military service pension.

(Courtesy of Military Service Pensions Collection, Military Archives)



Cumann na mBan member Anne Enright (née Barry) gave evidence in the 1930s of her role taking arms to the IRA for the Dillon's Cross ambush and later hiding them near where she lived with her aunt on Ballyhooley Road.

(Courtesy of Military Service Pensions Collection, Military Archives)



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# Reprisals begin

The ambush sparked an initial reprisal in the Dillon's Cross area, with several houses vacated under orders of a combination of Auxiliaries and British soldiers, some of them stripping and beating men on the road. At least a handful of homes were burned, including the house and butcher shop of the O'Hares – the former home of Cork Fenian, Brian Dillon. It was later demolished by a British Army tank, a scene that helped motivate local teenager Michael O'Donovan (who would become the famous short story writer Frank O'Connor) to join the IRA. These were just the first of the fires that would be deliberately set in Cork city that night. (Picture Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)

"He was a walking arsenal, his pockets bulging out with bombs... He said he was an Auxiliary, and they, the Auxiliaries, were going to blow up the city."

- Testimony of unnamed witness from Dillon's Cross who was fired on when he tried to stop his own home from burning.



Jeremiah Delaney, killed by Auxiliaries at home in Dublin Hill. (Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



Cornelius Delaney, died in the Mercy Hospital after Auxiliaries shot him, his brother Jeremiah and their uncle William Dunlea. (Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)

Although the Dillon's Cross ambushers had already left the Delaney home near Dublin Hill, Auxiliaries arrived there in the early hours of Sunday morning. They may have been brought there with the help of bloodhounds taken to the scene of the ambush. The poorly-disguised policemen shot brothers and IRA members Cornelius and Jeremiah Delaney, and their uncle William Dunlea, in the bedroom they shared. Jeremiah died within minutes and Cornelius died of his wounds almost a week later at the Mercy Hospital. Despite the tragedy, the Delaney family remained active in the independence movement. Cornelius and Jeremiah's sisters Kate, Mary Jane, Julia and Sheila maintained an IRA arms dump at the farm right through the Civil War.

Fortunately – and, perhaps, astonishingly – the Delaney brothers and Auxiliary Cadet Chapman were the only people to lose their lives violently that historic night in Cork city's turbulent War of Independence story.

The image of Jeremiah Delaney's funeral proceeding through St Patrick's Street on its way to St Finbarr's Cemetery on Tuesday, December 14, 1920, shows how the reprisals at Dillon's Cross were only a small taste of the destruction caused by Crown Forces intent on vengeance. (Courtesy of Irish Examiner)



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Around 9pm, shooting began on St Patrick's Street, where men in Auxiliary uniform were seen by several witnesses. One saw them stop outside Grant's department store near the Grand Parade end of the street. They entered the building and it was soon alight with fire. At the other end of St Patrick's Street, a tram was set on fire near the Fr Mathew statue.

Around 9.30pm, 38-year-old labourer Patrick Crowley was shot in the back of the knee on Winthrop Street. He was treated for a broken thigh bone at the North Infirmary hospital.

Six staff of the Munster Arcade who lived above the large St Patrick's Street department store were forced, along with two night watchmen, to evacuate under threat by Auxiliaries armed with revolvers. Uniformed men were seen throwing bombs into the shop downstairs. Men with rifles were also seen by employees leaving the premises with bags and flames were soon gushing from within, as fire took hold of the vast store.



Interior of the Munster Arcade on St Patrick's Street before the Burning of Cork. Eight staff were forced to evacuate as the shop was set alight with incendiary devices.

(Courtesy of Michael Lenihan)



Alexander Grant, drapers, 52-54 St Patrick's Street, as shown in Cork City Engineer's report on the Burning of Cork.

(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



As late as 1920, Cork Fire Brigade crews relied mostly on horse-drawn 'jumper' appliances like this one photographed in 1906. Firemen connected a hose reel beneath the carriage to street hydrants.

(Courtesy of Pat Poland)

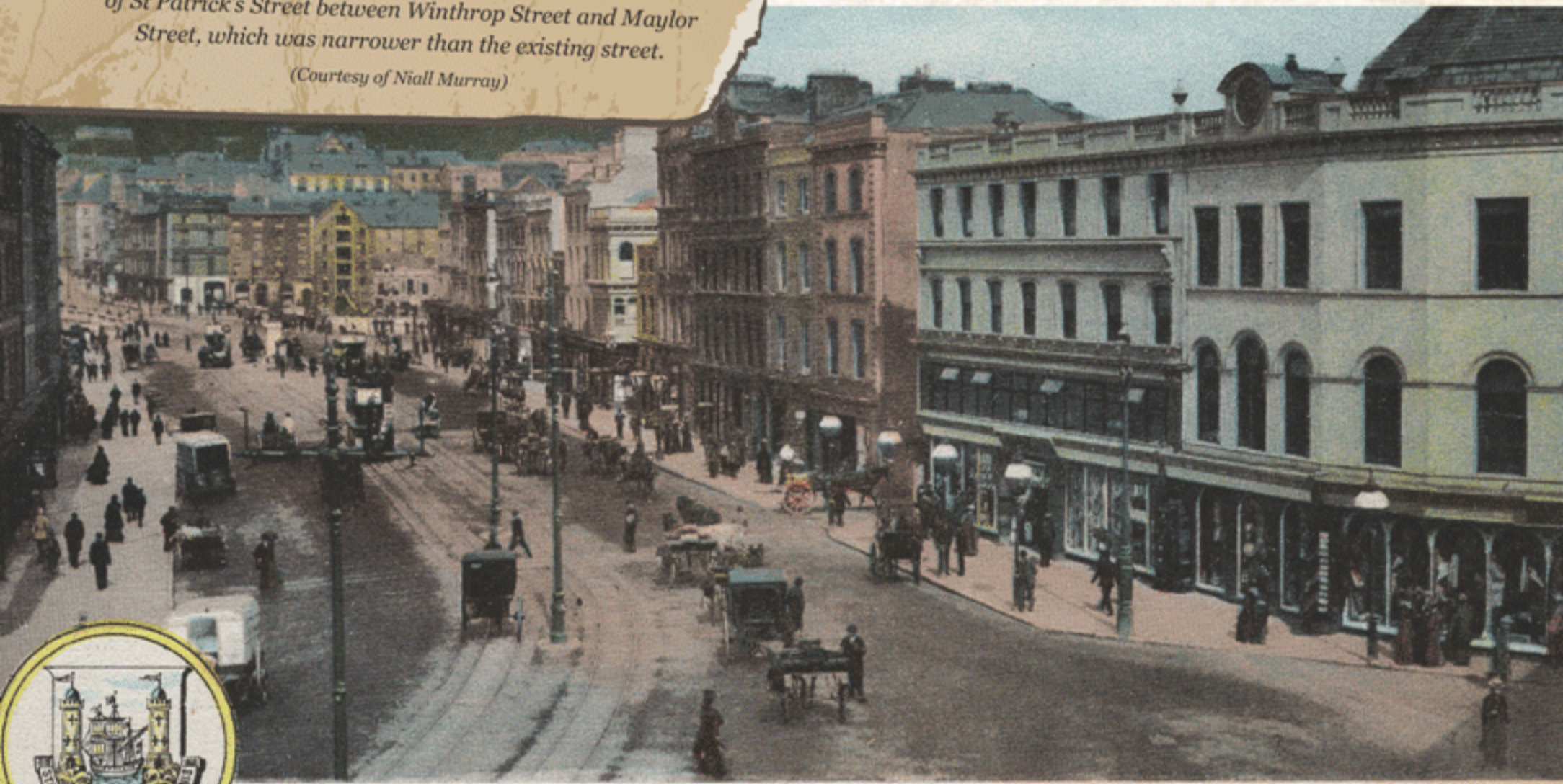
Until the Burning of Cork, the Cash & Co department store - on the right of this early 1900s image - dominated the section of St Patrick's Street between Winthrop Street and Maylor Street, which was narrower than the existing street.

(Courtesy of Niall Murray)

A similar ordeal unfolded for eight employees living on the premises of Cash & Co at the Winthrop Street junction of St Patrick's Street. After they were forced outside by armed men, one declaring himself to be an auxiliary policeman, the staff heard an explosion inside the shop.

As firemen arrived to try and fight the fires, word reached them - and they began to see for themselves - the growing number of blazes along St Patrick's Street. But their efforts to control them were disrupted by men they described as Auxiliaries who threatened to shoot them. In some cases, shots were fired in their direction, or their hoses were cut or had lorries driven over them. At least two firemen were hit by gunshots as they worked on St Patrick's Street and Merchants Quay.

Many shops on St Patrick's Street and nearby streets had their windows smashed and were looted by men described by several witnesses as wearing Auxiliary, police and military uniforms.



St. Patrick's Street.

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The only known night-time photograph of the city centre ablaze during the Burning of Cork. The location where it was taken or the section of the city visible on fire remain a mystery.

*(Courtesy of Michael Lenihan)*

Across the south channel of the River Lee, while firefighters battled the spreading blaze on St Patrick's Street, colleagues guarding the previously-attacked City Hall were forced by the arrival of armed men to abandon the building. Soon after, men came from the RIC's Union Quay headquarters with jerry cans. Explosions followed inside the City Hall, leading to a huge fire that engulfed it by around 3am.

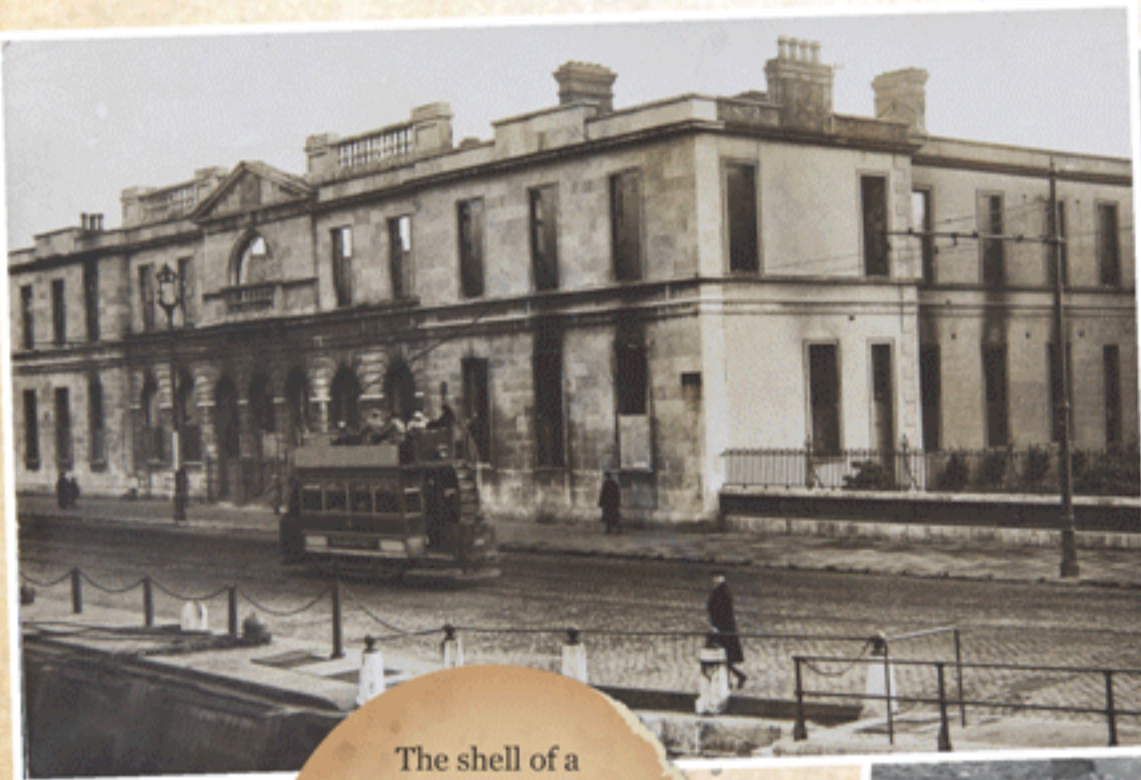
The firemen who tried to tackle the blaze were the subject of further gunfire from Crown Forces. When the fire hydrant they were using to hide the flames was turned off, the City Hall no longer had any chance of survival and its bullet-riddled clock tower came crashing down around 6am.

The fire had also spread to the adjoining Carnegie Library, which was destroyed along with its stock of 14,000 books.



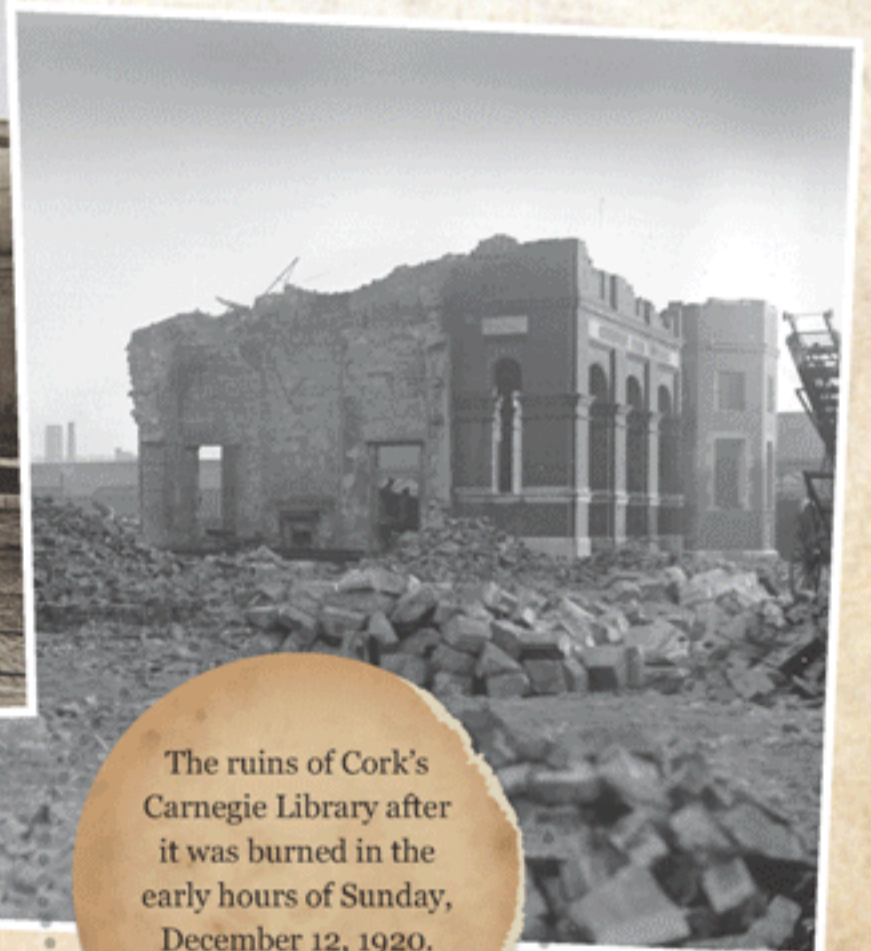
Cork's City Hall and Carnegie Library. The city's RIC headquarters was on nearby Union Quay.

*(Courtesy of Niall Murray)*



The shell of a burnt-out Cork City Hall, without its clock tower, was a sad sight for passing passengers on the tram to Blackrock.

*(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)*



The ruins of Cork's Carnegie Library after it was burned in the early hours of Sunday, December 12, 1920.

*(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)*



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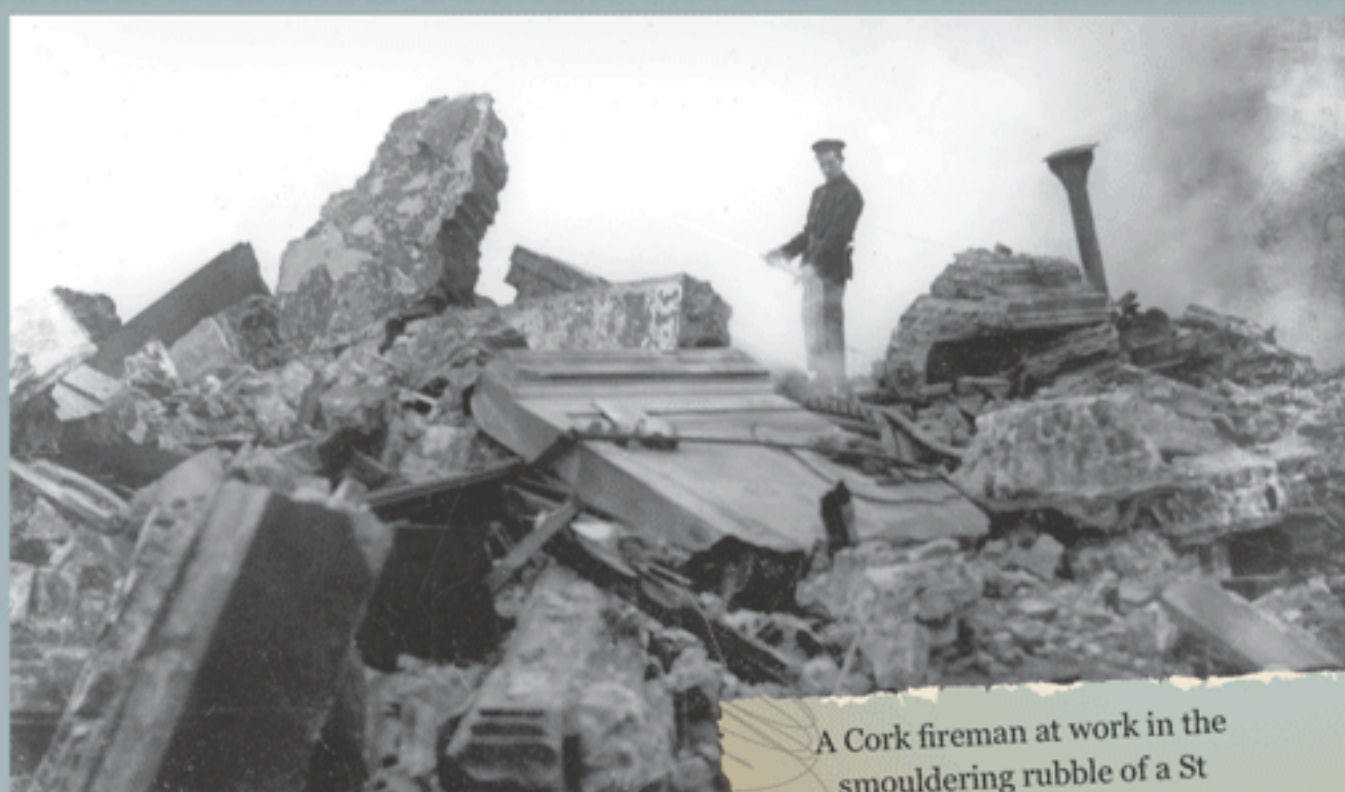


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As daylight revealed the extent of the damage to the city on Sunday morning, December 12, firemen were still working to keep the fires from spreading to more streets off St Patrick's Street.

They had managed to restrict the damage to a couple of blocks in the city centre with very limited resources under constant threat and occasional gunfire from Crown Forces. The work of Cork Fire Brigade, already exhausted from weeks of dealing with arson attacks, was overseen by its 71-year-old superintendent, Captain Alfred J Hutson.



A Cork fireman at work in the smouldering rubble of a St Patrick's Street ruin.  
*(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)*



Captain Alfred J Hutson, Superintendent of Cork City Fire Brigade  
*(Courtesy of Pat Poland)*



Citizens watched as firemen hosed down what remained of Roches Stores at 14-15 St Patrick's Street. To its left, tobacconist J O'Sullivan's New York House and Wolfe's ladies' outfitter were also gutted by fire. Children played in the rubble where the Lee Boot Company and Scully & O'Connell children's clothes shop had stood.

*(Picture courtesy of Cork City and County Archives Service)*

In support of their Cork colleagues, firemen from Dublin and Limerick came to the city to assist.

These eight Dublin Fire Brigade members arrived on a special train to Cork with their Leyland motor fire appliance around 2am on Monday, December 13. Dublin Fire Brigade's Chief Fire Officer, Captain Jack Myers (at front in helmet), said:

*"Cork is even worse than O'Connell Street and Abbey Street and the adjoining streets after Easter Week 1916."*

*(Picture courtesy of Irish Examiner)*



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The partial façade of Sunner's chemist was all that remained of the north-facing block of St Patrick's Street that once also included the Munster Arcade (whose 'temporary inquiry office' is seen on the left) and, to its right, Egan's jewellers and Forrest & Sons silk merchants. Most buildings running back Robert Street toward George's Street (now Oliver Plunkett Street) and on the eastern side of Cook Street were also destroyed or badly damaged. Visible near the top right of the photo is the end of the block on the western side of Cook Street - running from the Victoria Hotel at the corner with St Patrick's Street - that was saved from major damage by firemen.



(Courtesy of Cork City and County Archives Service)



Many photographs showing the extent of the damage on St Patrick's Street and adjoining streets were taken from the side windows of the Victoria Hotel overlooking Cook Street. Only the firemen's hosing of the hotel and adjoining Cook Street properties for several hours prevented them catching fire. They were very fortunate to succeed as the wind was driving heat in their direction from burning buildings at the other side of Cook Street.

Michael Mahony, Chief Officer of Cork Volunteer Fire Brigade, 1892-1896, helped prevent the Victoria Hotel and other Cook Street properties from burning.  
(Courtesy of Pat Poland)

A 1919 John Daly & Co advertisement mentions its Caroline Street head offices which burned on the night of December 11-12, 1920.  
(Courtesy of Niall Murray)



The crew there included former volunteer fireman, 57-year-old Michael Joseph Mahony, who came to assist the battle against the fires. He was managing director of distiller and Tanora manufacturer John Daly & Co, whose Caroline Street head offices - behind Cash's department store - were destroyed the same night.



Smoke and dust still rose from the remains of St Patrick's Street as work began on clearing the sites, watched by curious citizens.  
(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)



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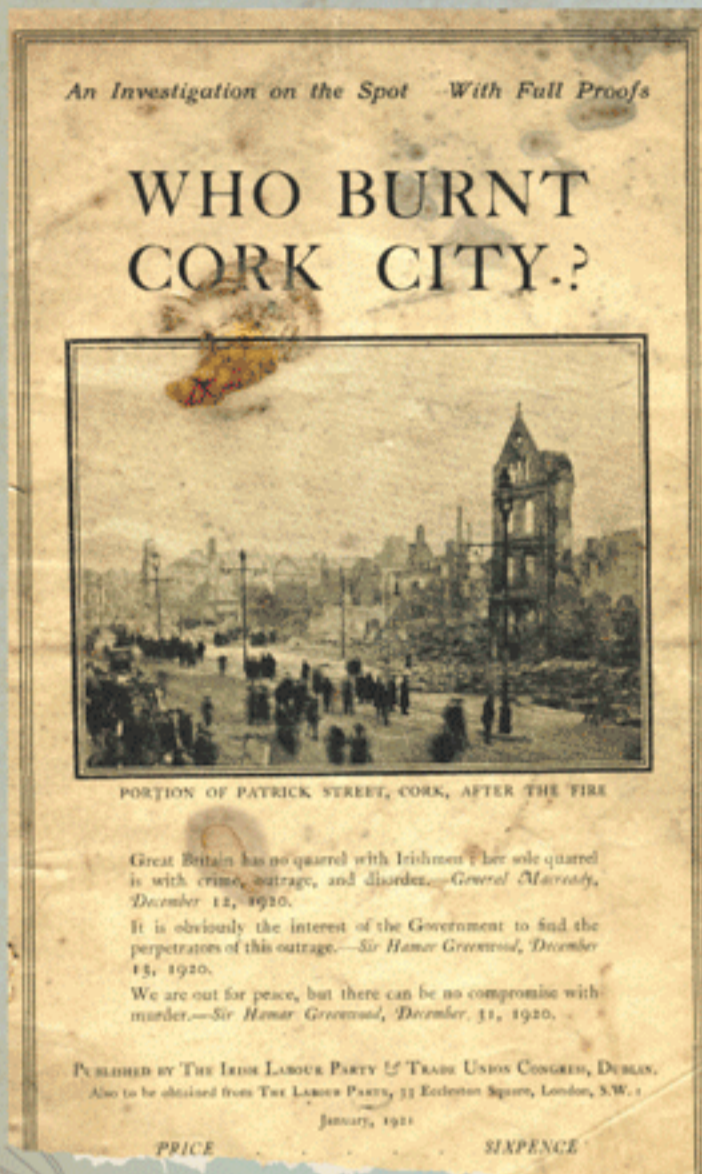


Members of a British Labour Party commission already investigating conditions in Ireland returned to Cork after hearing about the city centre's destruction. In a short interim report, they highlighted how eyewitnesses identified Auxiliaries or Black and Tans, or both, as starting the incendiary fires that spread to neighbouring properties. "The choice of places which were set on fire indicates a pre-conceived plan of destroying the whole of the centre of the city," they recorded. This prompted the Labour Party in London to ask Prime Minister David Lloyd George for a judicial inquiry into events in Cork city.



Cork City Fire Brigade superintendent Captain Alfred J Hutson (third from left) showing the ruins of Cork City Hall's 2,000-seat concert hall to members of the British Labour Party Commission on Conditions in Ireland.

(Courtesy of Pat Poland)



*Who Burnt Cork City?* booklet published by the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress

(Courtesy of Michael Lenihan)

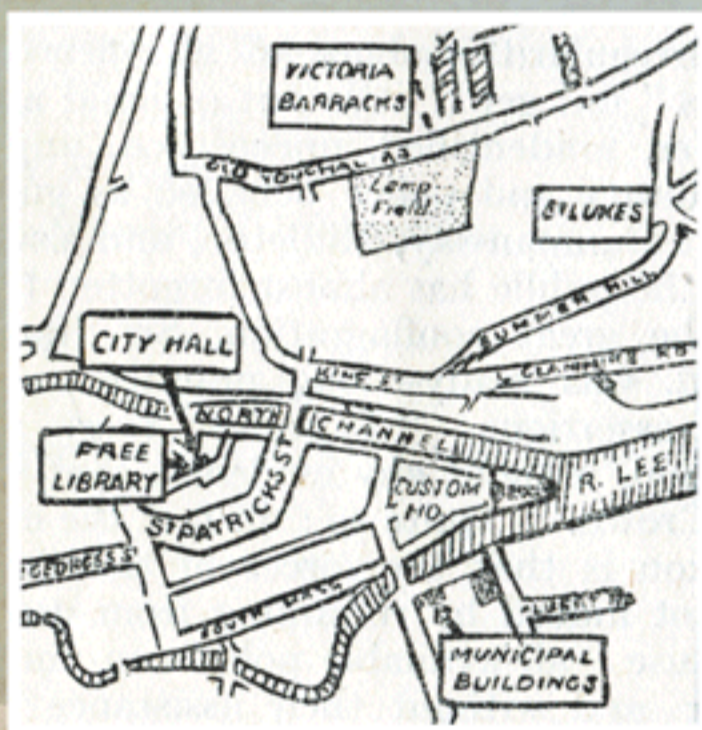
Many of the most damning witness accounts of Crown Forces participation in the Burning of Cork were given as anonymous testimony by citizens and workers interviewed for an Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress inquiry into the events.

These were published in its *Who Burnt Cork City?* booklet. It also detailed events in the weeks leading up to the night of December 11 and 12, and the role of police and soldiers in harassing ordinary citizens as well as those active in the republican military and political campaigns.

Despite all the evidence pointing to the RIC Auxiliaries' 'K' Company as the main culprits behind the Burning of Cork, nobody was ever charged for starting the fires. A military inquiry was sanctioned but it took place behind closed doors and was completed within a week of the flames being finally quenched. Cork Corporation refused to send representatives, including the firemen who were shot at and disrupted in their efforts to save the entire city centre from burning.

The report of the Strickland Inquiry – chaired by the same Major General the IRA had tried to abduct in September – concluded that members of 'K' Company were responsible for the fires at Grant's, the Munster Arcade and Cash's that spread to adjoining buildings. Three RIC members were implicated in the fire that destroyed City Hall and the Carnegie Library. A police representative dissented from the inquiry findings, which concluded that the military were powerless to intervene for fear of a worse scenario if they took on armed police in the streets.

The report was completed by the end of December 1920, but the British Government decided not to make it public, given the bleak picture it painted of the total loss of control over law and order in Cork.



This map appeared in the English Daily Chronicle (in which Prime Minister David Lloyd George had an interest), trying to downplay reports that Cork's City Hall was deliberately burned by suggesting it was in the commercial heart of the city near St Patrick's Street.

(Courtesy of Michael Lenihan)



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While finger-pointing and propaganda continued around who was behind the burning of five acres of Cork's thriving city centre, up to 6,000 people had been left out of work. In the United States, Cork's Lord Mayor Donal Óg O'Callaghan told the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland that damage caused on the night of the Burning of Cork, and in previous targeted fires in the city, amounted to over £4 million.

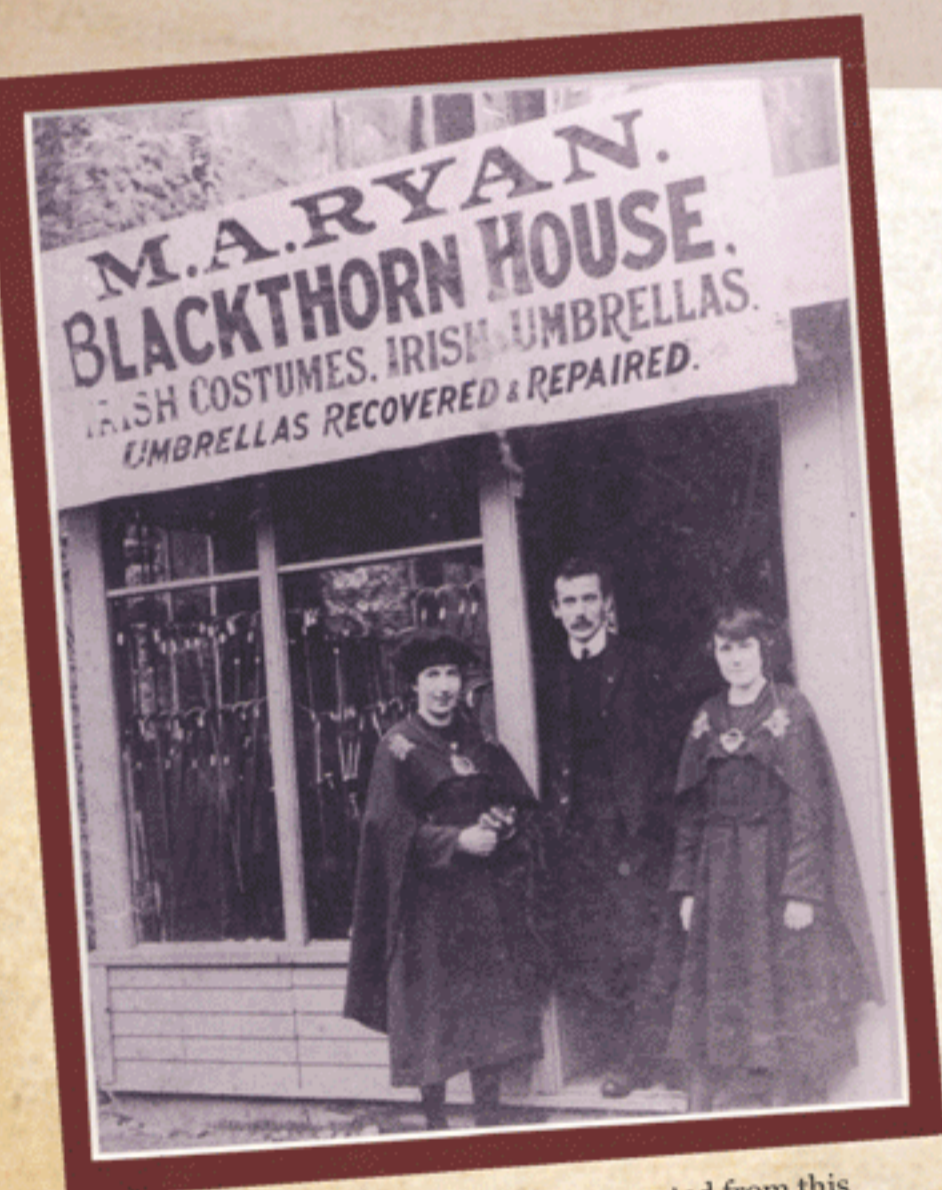
The employees of many destroyed or damaged businesses had lived above the premises and were now homeless, as well as jobless. Many firms endeavoured, where they could, to make a fresh start from temporary locations until their premises could be rebuilt.

*"The year which has just closed...has brought many districts to the brink of ruin... Reprisals, whether authorised or unauthorised, for outrages which peaceful members of the community strongly reprobate, but are powerless to prevent, have reduced the centre of our City to the condition of a devastated area in the war zone."*

- Cork Incorporated Chamber of Commerce and Shipping, Annual Report 1920.

As the War of Independence raged on around the city streets, Cork Corporation set about beginning oversight of the complex reconstruction programme. This would require not just huge finances, but also a vast amount of planning.

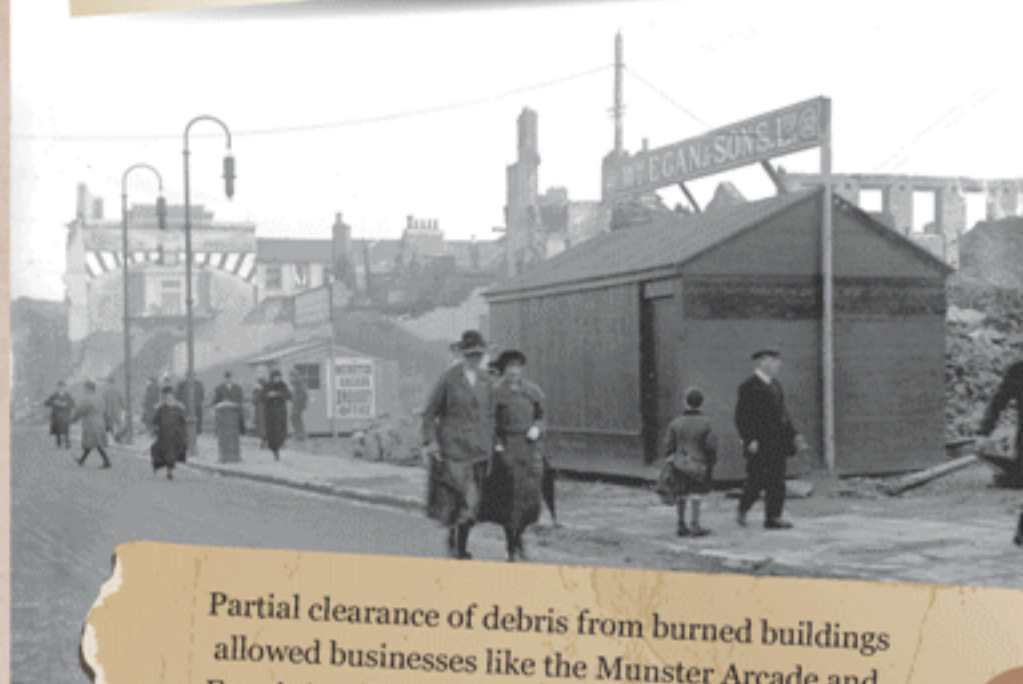
Agreement about the line of property frontages and changes to widths of side streets proved difficult to reach between Cork Corporation, business owners and their architects.



Ryan's Blackthorn House operated from this temporary premises on St Patrick's Street after being burned in a November 1920 fire.  
(Courtesy of Cork City and County Archives Service)



Egan's Jewellers former St Patrick's Street shopfront.  
(Courtesy of Michael Lenihan)



Partial clearance of debris from burned buildings allowed businesses like the Munster Arcade and Egan's jewellers to erect these wooden huts on St Patrick's Street for customer inquiries.  
(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)



Lord Mayor of Cork Donal Óg O'Callaghan was asked if he specifically blamed the Burning of Cork on any one person or group. He replied: "I charge definitely the British Crown forces in Cork."  
(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)

Cork Corporation map showing plans for a revised street-line at the St Patrick's Street-Winthrop Street junction.  
(Courtesy of Cork City and County Archives Service)



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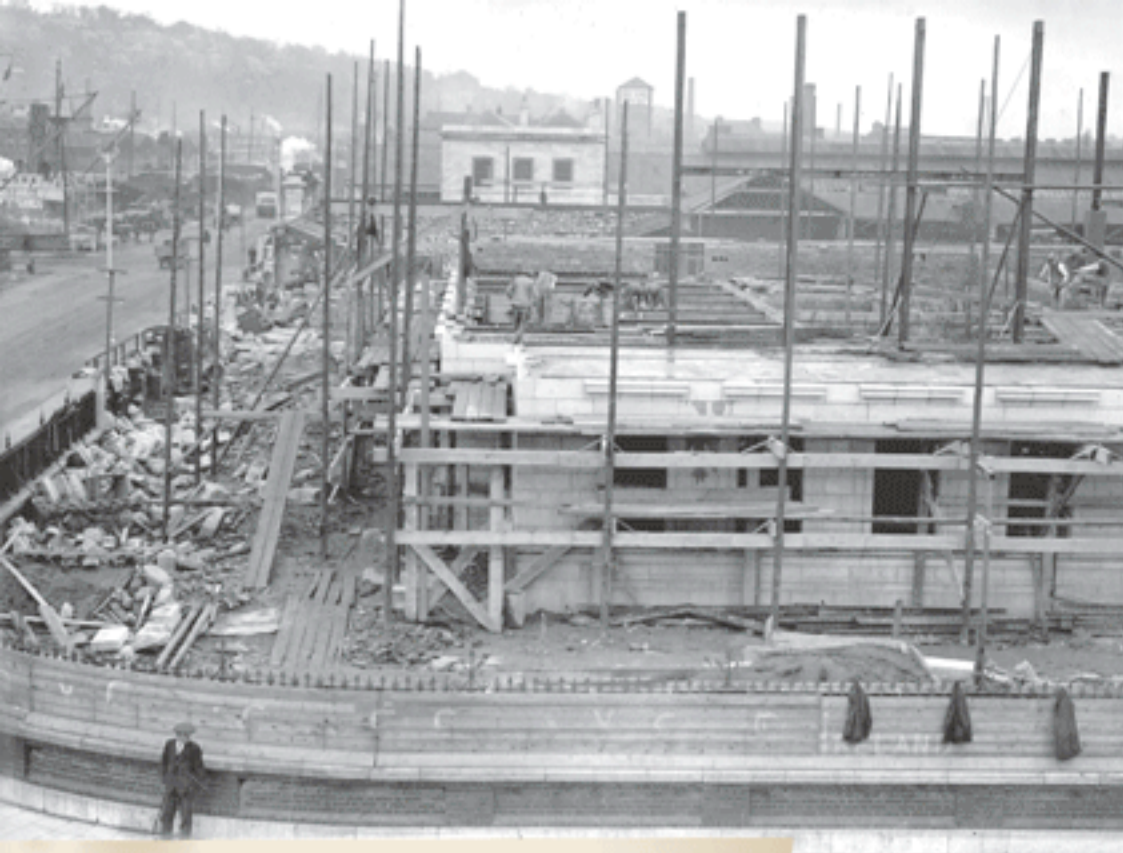
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Cork City Hall under construction in 1932.  
(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)

"The Chairman (Mr M. Collins) stated that the Provisional Government would gladly do anything possible to make such financial provision as would facilitate and encourage reconstruction work ... and he expressed the hope that the Local Authority would see that in the work of reconstruction the city was improved in appearance by the character of the new buildings to be erected."

- Minutes of Cork Corporation Reconstruction Committee, February 28, 1922 after a meeting with Michael Collins.

At court hearings in the early months of 1921, awards were made in compensation for businesses and others whose property was destroyed in the fires. Such claims were ordinarily payable by the local authority in whose area the damage took place. But the republican-controlled and cash-strapped Cork Corporation maintained its policy of not paying out for malicious injuries, particularly those related to actions by Crown Forces.

Payments for damages to the city and its business owners would instead be decided at a compensation commission eventually established under the December 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty that ended the War of Independence.

The Provisional Government and its chairman Michael Collins took a lead in progressing matters, knowing how long it might take before payments would be forthcoming from London. In February 1922, they approved a £250,000 grant for a scheme under which property owners with prior court awards could receive advances against eventual receipt of funds. This allowed planning and design work to begin sooner. It was also most fortunate, as the Shaw Compensation Commission's work would be slowed by the Civil War that erupted in June 1922, with Cork as a major battleground.

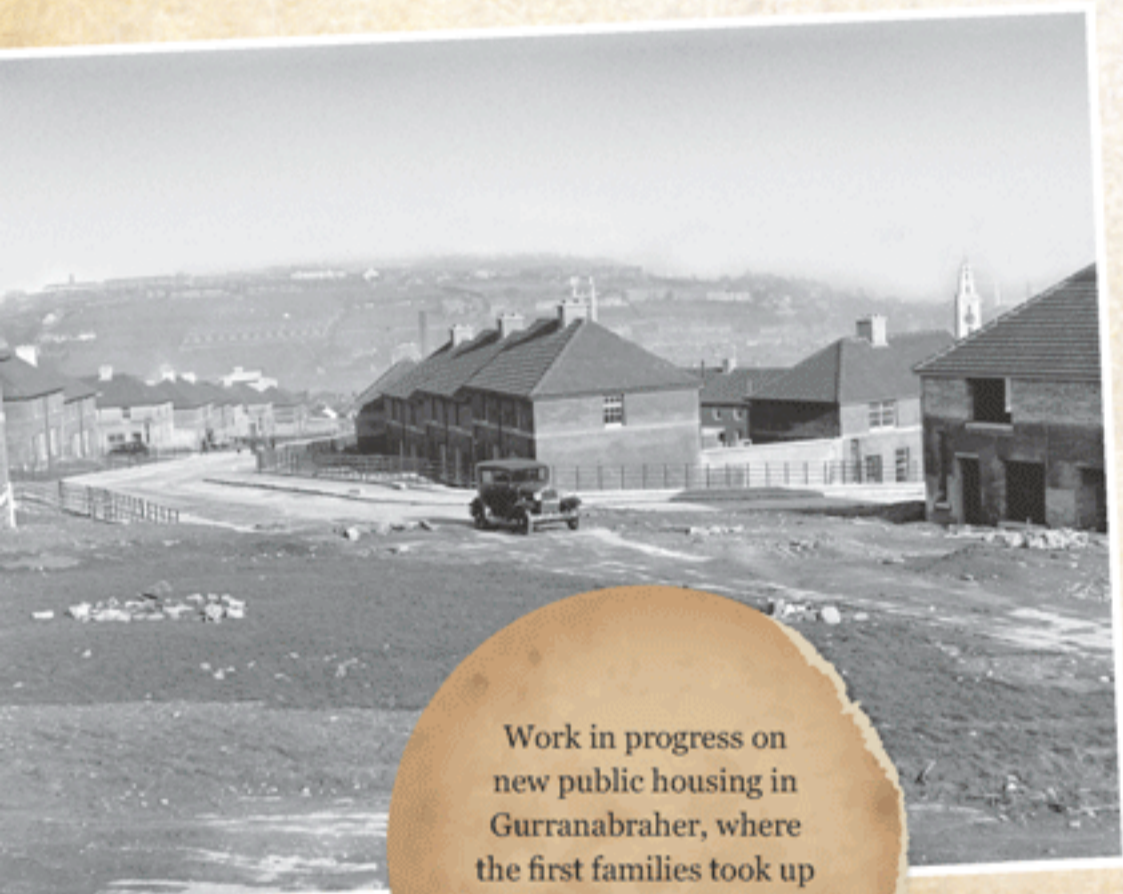


Philip Monahan, Cork City Commissioner, 1914-1929.  
(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)

In February 1924, the Shaw Commission reduced the original award against the British government for the burning of Cork City Hall from £93,500 to £73,275, of which £58,000 was to be spent on reconstruction. But when the lowest tender to build a new City Hall came in at £61,000, Cork City Commissioner Philip Monahan made a radical proposal in December 1924. He suggested using the money to build "houses for working classes," saying Cork Corporation would borrow later for a new headquarters. He said: "It is not easy to justify the expenditure of £58,000 on a luxury building when no money is available for housing, and when housing conditions are deplorable."

This facilitated small public housing schemes in Fair Hill and Turner's Cross, followed by the clearance of inner-city slums and moving their residents to new publicly-built suburbs like Gurrabraher and Ballyphehane.

In 1929, Cork Corporation received government approval to borrow money to build a new City Hall, on which work began in 1932.



Work in progress on new public housing in Gurrabraher, where the first families took up residence in March 1934.  
(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)



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By the late 1920s, the south side of St Patrick's Street had a bright modern appearance after several years of planning and reconstruction. As the Civil War ended in 1923, the approval process by Cork Corporation of business owner's plans saw most of the construction work get underway during 1924 and 1925.

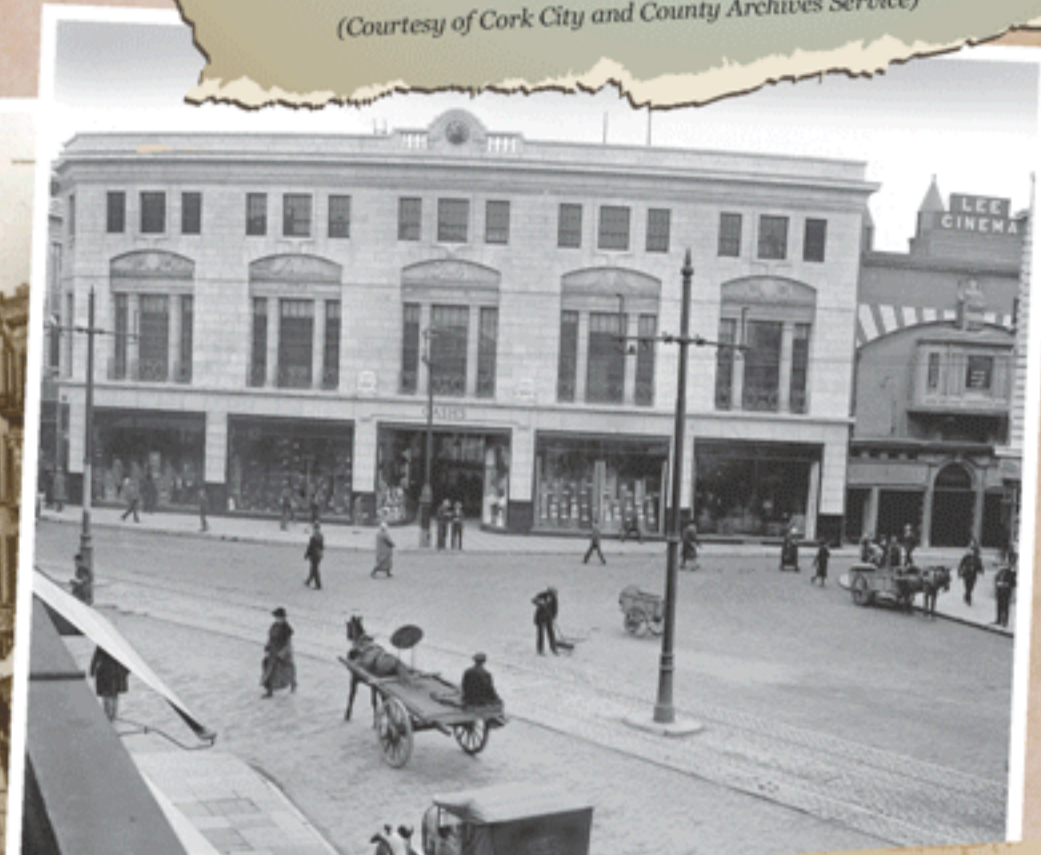
The designs featured a mix of architectural styles, but building heights were mostly uniform, unlike their predecessors. This was particularly evident in the block from Robert Street to Cook Street, which included the rebuilt Munster Arcade (now Penney's), Egan's and Forrest's premises.



The ruins of Cash & Co's Patrick's Street store which stretched back to Caroline Street, seen in the background.  
(Courtesy of Cork City and County Archives Service)



The new-look south side of St Patrick's Street which featured the rebuilt Munster Arcade (at left of photograph) contrasted with the old Georgian architecture of the buildings opposite.  
(Courtesy of Michael Lenihan)

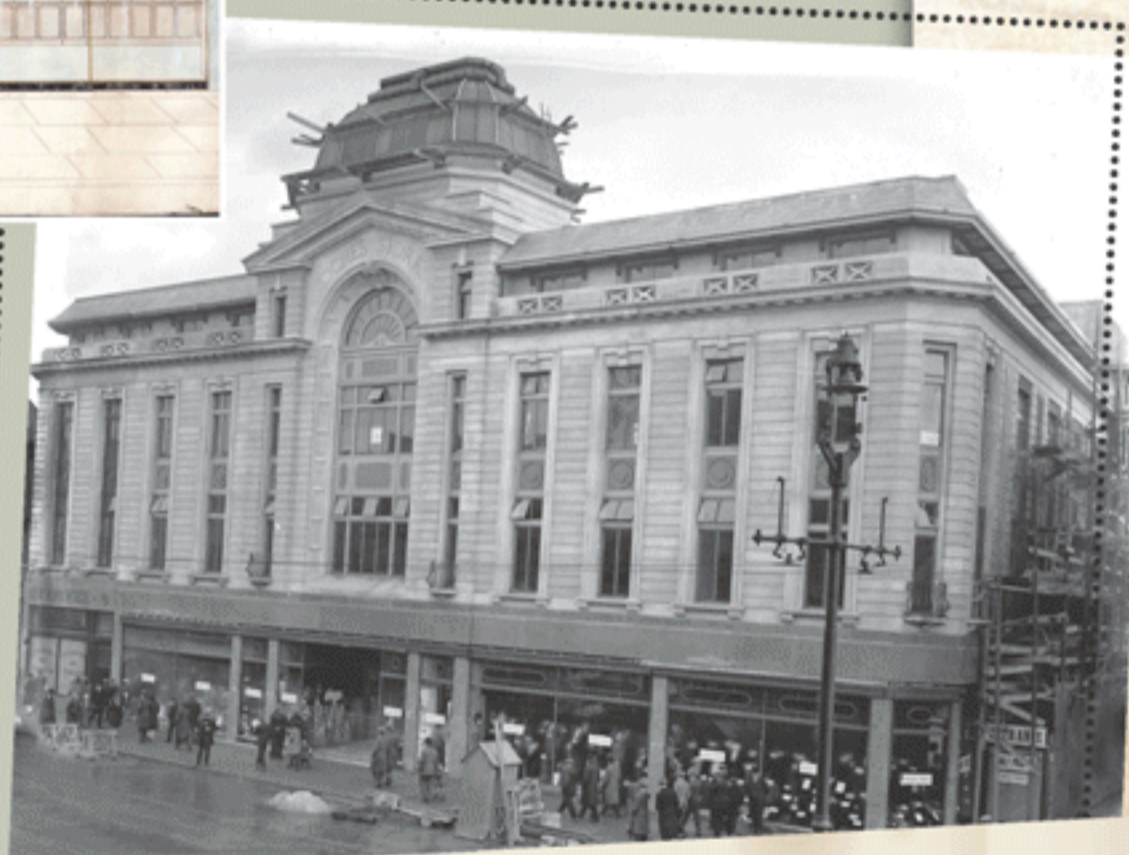


Cash's new-built department store soon after it opened in 1927. The Lee Cinema, in the right of this photo, had opened in November 1920, just weeks before the Burning of Cork. Only its façade survived but the same building frontage still remains in the same position on Winthrop Street today.  
(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)



Drawing by Cork architectural firm Chillingworth & Levie of proposed shopfront for reconstructed Roches Stores.  
(Courtesy of Cork City and County Archives Service)

Roches Stores was the last major business to get building work under way, after William Roche expanded his site through acquisitions of neighbouring firms. With an extended street frontage, it would be one of the most dominant and significant buildings on Cork's main shopping street, eventually opening to customers in January 1927.



Roches Stores in 1927, shortly after opening its doors to the public.  
(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)



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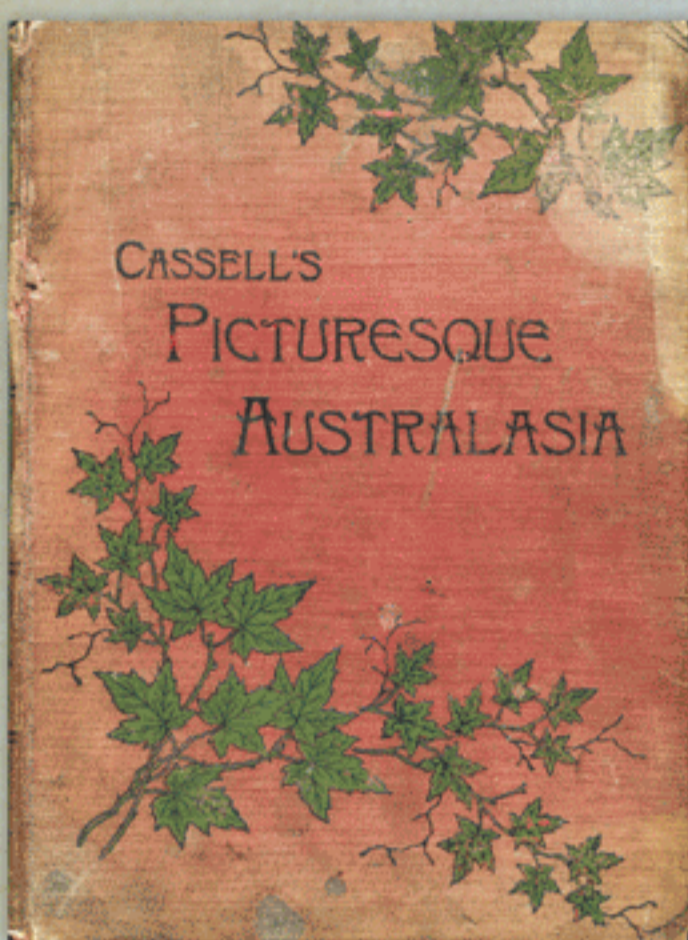
At a final cost reported by the Cork Examiner as £200,000, the new Cork City Hall was finally finished in 1935. Thousands turned out to see the official opening by Taoiseach Éamon de Valera on September 8, 1936.

*(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)*



After a successful international appeal for books to replace its burnt stock, Cork Public Library initially took temporary premises on Tuckey Street in 1924. It moved to its new address on Grand Parade in 1930, now part of Cork's Central Library.

*(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)*



This book is a rare survivor of the Cork Carnegie Library stock, being one of 1,000 that was out on loan on the night of the Burning of Cork.

*(Courtesy of Michael Lenihan)*

The number 'XII' of the clock in the tower over Cork City Hall, which fell to earth in the early hours of Sunday, December 12, 1920.

*(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)*



## Just like 1920, the year 2020 has been one of adversity for many citizens of Cork.

These surviving links to the public buildings that fell in the Burning of Cork are a reminder of the difficulties faced by previous generations of Corkonians.

But they also show us how they faced up to what seemed the toughest challenges and helped to see their city rise and become an even greater place to live, work and learn.

Cork City Libraries would like to acknowledge and thank the following individuals and institutions for their help with this Exhibition.

- Cork City Council
- Cork Public Museum
- Cork City and County Archives
- Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
- Irish Examiner
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- Military Service Pensions project, Military Archives
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- Pat Poland
- Michael Lenihan
- Atlas of the Irish Revolution editorial team, University College Cork



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