Oration at the centenary commemoration of the Dripsey Ambush on 3rd October 2021 by Gabriel Doherty of the UCC School of History.

REVEREND FATHERS, COUNTY MAYOR, FAMILY MEMBERS OF THE VOLUNTEER SOLDIERS OF THE DRIPSEY AMBUSH, MEMBERS OF THE DRIPSEY AMBUSH MEMORIAL COMMITTEE, ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN ETC.

To have received the invitation to address this, the centenary commemoration of the Dripsey ambush, is one of the great honours of my life. So great is the honour, indeed, that I have to confess that I hesitated, at least momentarily, before accepting, primarily because I am conscious of how significant an event it was in the history of this locality, of the rebel county of Cork, and of Ireland as a whole.

I was not sure when I received the invitation, and am perhaps still a little uncertain, as to whether any words of mine can ever really be adequate to pay proper tribute to those who went out to fight for Irish freedom in late January 1921, and most especially to the memory of those who never returned home. But as one of the themes of my address is the vital role that a sense of duty and service played in those momentous times, I think it behoves us all to do what we can to keep alive the memory of those heroes – and that term is certainly warranted – and so I responded with both a glad heart, and a somewhat racing pulse!

Before I begin in earnest, let me extend this point very briefly and pay tribute to those involved in the memorial committee, some of whom I have previously had the pleasure of knowing, and some of whom I have encountered more recently. I sincerely believe that both they, and their

predecessors going all the way back to the 1920s, are exemplars of the same spirit of service that motivated those whose names are listed on the memorial – albeit, of course, that service has been rendered in a different way.

As someone who has had the immense good fortune to be paid to teach and research history in University College Cork, I am simultaneously in your debt and stand in awe of the voluntary, silent, worthy work that you have done and continue to do, year in, year out, in keeping alive an awareness of these times past. And so, a personal word of thanks from me to you.

And thus to my own views. What I will not be doing to any great extent is to recount the sequence of events that took place a century ago, mainly because I do not need to – anyone who wishes to obtain this information is strongly advised to purchase either the centenary commemorative booklet, which has an excellent summary, or the longer, detailed account authored by Mary O'Mahony, herself a graduate of the School of History in UCC, and a good friend of mine. Or both!

What I will instead do is to focus on the *meaning*, and *significance* of what happened. Not to chronicle the events as it were, but to assess and interpret their importance, as best I can.

In this vein the thing that must be emphasised, first, foremost and repeatedly, was that the Dripsey ambush was planned as an act of war, to be carried out by the volunteer citizen soldiers of the Irish Republican Army against the professional soldiers of the British Army garrison in Ireland. Everything that led up to the staging of the ambush, everything that occurred on the day itself, and all that flowed from it, must be considered with that plain, unvarnished truth in mind.

It is a strange, decidedly uncomfortable reflection on how the history of that period has been conveyed in certain quarters in Ireland over the past hundred years that some might take issue with this description. Indeed a tiny number might even go as far as to echo (I think parrot might be the better verb) the insulting terms used by the London government of the day to denigrate their republican adversaries. But this *was* a military engagement, between two belligerent forces, and the evidence for same is provided by none other than the British Army itself.

On the issue of the military standing and capability of the IRA, I quote from a confidential report sent by Lt General Frederick Shaw, then Commander-in-Chief of British forces in Ireland, to the British Cabinet in March 1920. He stressed that even then: 'the … Irish Republican Army is organized and commanded in a manner which would be creditable to highly-trained military experts; its communication and intelligence services are most efficient, and its discipline leaves little to be desired … It is only want of armament which has prevented [it] …becoming a most formidable and open enemy.'

In short, ten months prior to the events in Dripsey (ten months during which that deficiency of weaponry was only partially rectified) the head of the British garrison in Ireland was informing his political masters in plain language that the IRA was not alone *really* an army, but a *really fine* army – and the First Cork Brigade, of which the 6th Battalion was an integral and active element, was demonstrably one of its élite units.

But this is not the decisive evidence that the British, as well as the Irish Volunteers, viewed the events of that day in military terms, for the very charge levied in the court martial against those captured was that they 'did levy war against His

Majesty by attacking … a detachment of His Majesty's forces.' I shall return to these sinister proceedings in a second.

Of course, the Volunteers needed no validation from the British side as to their standing, for they derived all they needed in this respect from within their own republican tradition, historic and recent.

- The 1916 Proclamation had drawn attention to the repeated assertion in arms of the Irish people to their right national freedom and sovereignty, and this right was what the Volunteers at Dripsey were *asserting*.
- The Message to the Free Nations ratified on the opening day of Dáil Éireann on 21 January 1919 recognised an 'existing state of war' between England and Ireland, and this was the war that the Volunteers at Dripsey were *waging*.
- And the Declaration of Independence endorsed on the same occasion demanded the evacuation of the country by the English garrison, and this was the garrison who the Volunteers at Dripsey were *fighting*.

So an act of war occurred here, in which soldiers of both nations took part, and as a consequence of which one Irish Volunteer suffered an injury that ultimately proved fatal. But consider what followed!

The captured soldiers were not afforded the honourable prisoner of war treatment to which their status, and deeds, entitled them. Rather they, in the manner of felons, were put on trial for their lives, the charge being that they had waged war. But waging war is what soldiers do, and have done since time immemorial. That is their reason to exist.

The offence committed by the Volunteers in British eyes was, thus, not any violation of the rules of war, but their scrupulous observance. The Volunteers fought a clean fight for the duration of the engagement, yet that was precisely the

charge levelled against them. In other words, those who were executed were done to death not for having *done* anything wrong, but simply for *being* who they were, soldiers of the Irish republic.

Let the inescapable truth then be stated clearly. There was indeed a crime, a war crime with which the name of Dripsey will forever be associated. It was a war crime perpetrated by the British victors. It occurred not during the heat and fury of a military engagement on a battlefield, but in the considered quiet of a judicial forum held in a secure military barracks. It was the war crime of the trial, conviction and execution of prisoners of war.

It is a point I never cease to make when I take students and visitors to UCC to the site of the republican plot on campus, final resting place of these and other victims of this inhumane policy. I repeat it here now, during the ceremony to mark the centenary of the ambush, and I think it should never be forgotten – most especially by the British people.

Lest I be accused of glossing over the sequel to those executions, I acknowledge that other deaths followed as a direct consequence of these executions, those of Mary Lindsay and James Clarke. Let us not, for fear of giving unnecessary offence in this the centenary year, be afraid to fail to call the actions of the former in regard of the ambush by their proper name, however unpleasant.

The passing on of information regarding the IRA ambush was a hostile act in a time of war, one that transformed those who so acted from civilians, who were entitled to remain above the conflict and be guarded from it, into spies who could not expect any such protection. I certainly do not deny that Mrs Lindsay acted according to her political convictions, but such convictions were no defence against the charge properly levelled against her.

It is a matter of record that those on the republican side did everything humanly possible to avoid the desperately sad sequel. The final decision lay in British hands – to respect the customs of war and to spare all the lives of those in custody, or to ignore them and condemn them all to death. Tragically they chose the latter, lesser path.

Both the Volunteers at Dripsey and Mary Lindsay acted according to the lights dictated by their conscience, and both paid the ultimate price for so doing. But there, to my mind, the similarity ends. The Volunteers acted as soldiers to free their country, to ensure that the will of the Irish people would be the decisive factor in the future government of Ireland. Mrs Lindsay acted as a spy, and sought to ensure that Britain continued to rule the country, in defiance of the will of the Irish people. I leave it to those assembled here to silently decide for themselves which was the better path.

But it is the republican Volunteers who are the proper focus of today's commemoration, and it is to them that I return for the remainder of this address. When we consider their deeds on that day, a bigger question, or several bigger questions, suggest themselves: *why* did these local men engage in this act of war? *Why* did they become soldiers of the Irish Republic in the first place? *Why* were they willing to risk their lives for the cause of that Republic?

Well, there are a number of answers to those questions, but what is for certain is that self-interest played no part in their motives. Consider the prospects facing Irish Volunteers when they mobilised to serve that day. Remember that the British by this stage had most certainly let loose the dogs of war in Ireland, including

- the deployment of specially-recruited, ill-disciplined paramilitary forces;

- the declaration of martial law and the abandonment of even the pretence of democratic government;
- and the infliction of authorised collective punishments of the civilian population, amongst many other indefensible steps.

The Volunteers at Dripsey knew well that they faced the very real prospect of being killed in action. But they also knew that even if they survived and triumphed in the engagement, they faced the prospect of an indefinite period ‘on the run’, during the depth of an Irish winter, constantly moving from safe house to safe house, or even sleeping rough, at all time knowing they could be attacked without warning by Crown forces. They had to live with the knowledge that were their identities to become known, it would at minimum mean the burning of their family home, and quite possibly the visitation of still fouler deeds upon other family members.

However, if they survived but were vanquished, they knew that

- the shooting of Volunteers out of hand under the guise of ‘trying to escape’ was already an established feature of British operations;
- that there were documented cases of captured prisoners suffering physical ill-treatment in custody that certainly passed well beyond the threshold of torture;
- that at best they faced indefinite detention in insanitary internment camps, in which several prisoners were to perish;
- that the British had already, in the case of Kevin Barry, begun executing prisoners of war.

Yet, knowing all these risks, all these dangers, all these hardships, the Volunteers mustered and they fought. Why? Why did they do these hard, dangerous things, with the

prospect of no reward other than the knowledge that they had served the republican cause?

Well, the answer is surely in the question. It was the beguiling nature of that cause, the cause of freedom, the cause of the Republic that drew so many willing to its flag. This call of service was, to the men and women of that greatest generation, an irresistible one.

Until the spring of last year, most of us had become accustomed to the wrong-headed idea that service was something rendered by those at the bottom, as it were, of the social pile to those above, and they were dependent upon, and somehow owed something to, their 'betters.'

Well, if ever there was an illustration of the truth of the gospel injunction that the first shall be last and the last first, it has been provided over the intervening months. We have witnessed across all sectors of society, from health workers to those who work in unheralded areas such as shop assistants, that service is needed; that service is virtuous; that service is a noble calling, and that those who perform it are deserving of our sincerest gratitude.

And if this is true of service in general, it is especially true of those who perform service voluntarily, with no thought of pecuniary gain. And above all it is true of those who, as at Dripsey, freely served in the knowledge that death might be result of their willing, giving actions.

Service of the cause of the Republic such as was rendered here was power in its most authentic form – not the illusory, superficial, showy power of Empire, not even the very real and very cruel power deployed by the British to kill republican prisoners of war – an act that merely demonstrated the weakness of the British claim to govern Ireland in the interests of the Irish.

By way of contrast, the embrace of service as witnessed by the action at Lissarda harnessed the motive power of the Irish people to the keen edge provided by the Volunteers, and the effect was devastating and historic. Even the sharpest blade cannot inflict a wound if there is not force behind it. But if there is, as there was in Cork in these tumultuous times, even something as seemingly invulnerable as the British empire could be dealt a debilitating injury.

The empire could kill the bodies of prisoners of war. But in so doing it only liberated and strengthened the ideal that inspired them to serve their country in the first place, and drove on their cause to new, unimagined heights.

So in conclusion, let us recall the names of those Irish heroes who fell in the service of their country, and in so doing let us also recall their comrades in arms, who survived. While we mourn their premature deaths, and are conscious of what more they had to contribute, let us be prouder yet that they served, and in their short lives gave so much:

Captain James Barrett
Volunteer John Lyons
Volunteer Timothy McCarthy
2nd Lieutenant Thomas O'Brien
Volunteer Daniel O'Callaghan
Volunteer Patrick O'Mahony

May God rest them.