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John Jack 'Rover' McCann (1886-1920): Irish Volunteer

Peter F. Whearity

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 experience of war. This is also true of the 1916 Easter Rising and War of Independence in Ireland. One can read extensive biographies of Michael Collins, Éamon de Valera and other national figures but the experiences of ordinary Volunteers and the sacrifices they made have been overlooked. This study is an attempt to redress that imbalance. John Jack 'Rover' McCann, an agricultural labourer from Lusk, County Dublin, was an active Irish Volunteer from 1914 until his death at the hands of the Black and Tans in 1920. However, apart from two monuments to his memory in the towns of Lusk and Rush, his name is little known outside that area. Yet he, too, paid the ultimate price and laid down his life for his country like more famous Irishmen of the time and therefore deserves to be remembered as much for his sacrifice as they are for theirs. This study explores Rover's life and that of his family, including his younger brother, James, a Dublin Fusilier who lost his life in France in the First World War. The first part of this paper looks at the early years of his life, his education and his interest in hurling and membership of the Lusk branches of the Irish National Foresters and the Irish Volunteers. The second part deals with his involvement with the 5th Dublin (Fingal) Brigade which was commanded by the legendary nationalist Thomas Ashe. His participation in the Battle of Ashbourne during Easter week 1916 is considered along with his subsequent arrest and imprisonment. Finally, the third part examines his life after his release from Frongoch camp, the 'University of Revolution', his marriage to Rush girl Annie Cosgrove in 1917 and his subsequent move to Rush where he continued the fight during the War of Independence until he met his untimely death at the hands of the Black and Tans in November 1920. The study makes use of documents, photographs, and oral evidence provided by Teresa McCann, wife of Rover's youngest son, Sean, a long serving station-master at Malahide, County Dublin. The McCann family's wholehearted co-operation proved invaluable to the furtherance of a study that would have been immeasurably poorer without it. Other sources employed include census returns, parish records of the towns of Rush and Lusk and material from local school attendance registers. The Loughshinny and Rush Historical Society's archive proved useful and I am indebted to its chairperson, Margaret McCann-Moore, for her assistance. Earlier work on Rover's life by Lennie Martin, Jimmy Archer and Kevin Thorp, along with that of Carol Cosgrove, provided an excellent platform from which to carry out further research.

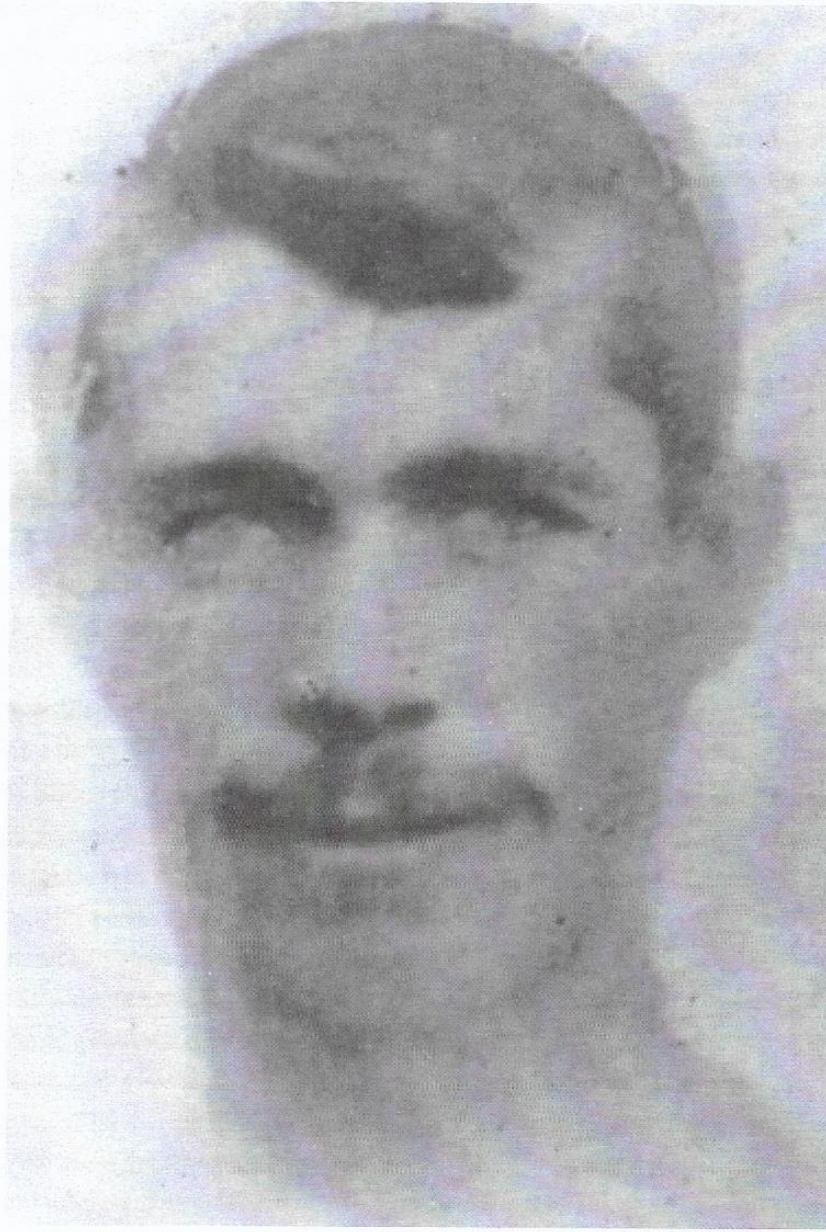


Plate 1: John 'Rover' McCann (courtesy of Pat Kelly, Lusk)

The contours of McCann's military career can be traced by recourse to the extensive collection of papers retained in the National Archive of Ireland and the Military History Bureau at Rathmines where the testimonies of Charles Weston, James Crenigan, Michael McAllister and others add much useful information. Genealogical information about the McCann family was also provided by Bernadette Marks and a rare photograph of Rover was made available by Pat Kelly (Plate 1). Other material came

from the National Library of Ireland, Dublin City Library (Gilbert), the National Museum of Ireland and Kilmainham Gaol Museum. The study will seek 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 and their hinterlands to the extent that his memory is still alive and fresh even at this remove in time, ninety years after his death.

I

John (Jack) McCann, otherwise known as 'Rover', was born on 26 July 1886 at Featherbed Lane, Ballykea, Loughshinny, County Dublin.¹ He was baptised by Fr F. O'Carroll on 27 July at St Maur's Chapel, Rush, his godparents being Michael Monks and Anna Fagan.² His father was Daniel McCann (b. 1845) and his mother was Sarah Murray (b. 1856). His paternal grandparents were Matthew McCann and Mary Moore and, on the maternal side, Christopher Murray and Margaret Fagan. Daniel and Sarah, both Dubliners, were married on 24 September 1876 at Lusk, County Dublin.³ The couple had nine sons, Rover being the fourth born. The others were Matthew, Christopher, Daniel, Thomas, James, Joseph, Patrick and Peter.⁴ The two eldest boys attended Loughshinny National School from c. 1886 and a note in the margin of a contemporary roll book states that the McCanns went to live at 34 Back Lane, Lusk, on 16 March 1889 when Rover was three years old.⁵ The living conditions of the McCann family at Back Lane in 1901 were more congested than the other residents on the same street.⁶ Their new home was a third-class dwelling consisting of two rooms. It was mud-walled and roofed with thatch. Living in this small space were eleven family members ranging in age from eighty-five years old (Matthew the grandfather, a retired railway worker) down to one year old (baby Peter). Dan McCann worked as a railway labourer and his age in 1901 was given as fifty-six years.⁷ Sarah McCann was forty years old and worked in the home caring for a family which, at that time, included all but her eldest son Matthew who lived elsewhere.⁸

Rover was fourteen years old in 1901 and already working as an agricultural labourer, a job he probably took after leaving school.⁹ As regards his education, it is not clear which school he attended. His brothers Matthew and Christopher received their schooling at Loughshinny. However, as Rover was only a child when he left the

¹ Bernadette Marks interviewed by author, 28 January 2003.

² Fr Stokes PP, Rush, interviewed by author, 30 January 2003.

³ Census of Ireland, 1901.

⁴ Census of Ireland, 1901.

⁵ School Register, Loughshinny National School.

⁶ Census of Ireland, 1901.

⁷ Census of Ireland, 1901.

⁸ N.L.I., p. 6616.

⁹ Census of Ireland, 1901.

area, it is unlikely that he attended there.¹⁰ School registers at Lusk revealed only the name of Peter McCann, a younger brother who was enrolled in September 1903 having come from the infants' class at Rush.¹¹ School registers at Rush, which might have contained Rover's details, could not be found and a retired teacher related never having seen nor heard of such roll books for the relevant period c. 1890, thereby suggesting they are no longer extant.¹² In the absence of documentary evidence it remains open to the suggestion that he attended at Rush as did his brother Peter. The origin of the nickname 'Rover' is not clear but queries on the subject elicited one common answer: his propensity to roam in pursuit of his friends.¹³ Rover played hurling regularly for Lusk Round Towers G.A.A Club, a tradition carried on until some years ago by his nephew, James McCann.¹⁴ A photograph c. 1906 shows a group of hurlers including Rover and his two brothers Dan and Matthew (Plate 2).¹⁵ It is said that Rover played many competitive games for the Lusk club and may have won a county championship medal with the team in 1915. However, this event is not recorded in *Lusca Abú*, the 1981 handbook that chronicles the club's history and such a significant omission suggests that it may not have happened at all.¹⁶ Lennie Martin has suggested that Rover along with other Lusk hurlers may have been chosen to represent Dublin in a championship match against Wexford, a close-fought contest in which the Dublin team came out the losers.¹⁷

By 1911 census returns document some changes that had occurred in the McCann household, principally the deaths of Rover's mother and grandfather within the previous few years. There was a considerable disparity in age between the two which might indicate something about the difference in the lifestyle of males and females at that time. Matthew was nearly ninety years old while Sarah was less than fifty. In Sarah's case a causative factor in her death may have been the strain of caring for eleven people in cramped conditions without any of the basic utilities such as running water or electricity that are taken for granted today. He, on the other hand, was being cared for by Sarah along with all her other charges. She paid a high price for marrying young and bearing children almost yearly with little respite. Perhaps it's little wonder that she died young. If she had lived a little longer she could have enjoyed the benefit of the improved living conditions brought about when the family moved to a new home at 17 Back Lane, a similar but larger dwelling that also contained an extra room.

¹⁰ School register, Loughshinny National School.

¹¹ Oral testimony of Pearle Finnegan, Lusk, 2 June 2004.

¹² Oral testimony of Peggy Rigney (retired teacher), Rush, 2 June 2004.

¹³ Lenny Martin, Jimmy Archer and Kevin Thorp (eds), 'John Rover McCann', in *Dear Book* (Rush, 1992).

¹⁴ James McCann, Lusk, interviewed by author, 5 July 2003.

¹⁵ Photograph in possession of Pat Kelly, Lusk.

¹⁶ *Lusca Abú*, in possession of Pat Rooney, Jordanstown, Lusk.

¹⁷ Lenny Martin, Jimmy Archer and Kevin Thorp (eds), 'John Rover McCann', in *Dear Book* (Rush, 1992).



Plate 2: Round Towers c. 1906, courtesy of Lennie Martin and Jimmy Archer¹⁸

The new home catered for only five occupants, less than half the previous number. Living with Dan at that time were his sons Christopher (28), unmarried and working as an agricultural labourer, Jack 'Rover' (25), unmarried and similarly employed, Patrick (14) and Peter (11).¹⁹ The house vacated by Dan's family was taken by the Devine family and, in an interesting insight into how close-knit Lusk was at the time, two of the Devine daughters, Ellen and Mary, later married Christopher and Thomas McCann.²⁰

Through his participation in hurling and his membership of organisations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (G.A.A.) and the Irish National Foresters (I.N.F.), Rover was probably influenced by the nationalistic fervour being propagated by those organisations in the early part of the twentieth century. In the Lusk area these feelings of Irish nationalism were greatly stimulated by the arrival in 1908 of Thomas Ashe to take up a post as school principal in nearby Corduff.²¹ Ashe had Irish nationalism

¹⁸ Top row, left to right: F. Carton, John Maypothor, Tom Sweetman, Dick Carton, James Williams, Dick Kelly, Dan McCann, and Dick Donnelly. Middle row: John 'Rover' McCann, John Monks, Edward Rooney, Richard Aungier, John Kelly, Breen Mahony, and James Connelly. Bottom row: John Dennis, Matt McCann, John Rooney, Tom McArdle, Mick Doyle, and James Rooney.

¹⁹ Census of Ireland 1911.

²⁰ Joseph McCann, Lusk, interviewed by author, 5 July 2003.

²¹ Sean O'Mahoney, *The first hunger striker, Thomas Ashe 1917* (Dublin, 2001), p. 6.

ingrained in his bones from his upbringing on his father's farm near Lispole, County Kerry. He was fluent in the Irish language, a gifted musician and a fine hurley player to boot. Both pupils and parents were well disposed towards him because his ability as a teacher allowed him to achieve results without recourse to corporal punishment. However, his teaching methods occasionally brought him into conflict with the National Board of Education in Dublin which disliked his deviation from the set curriculum.²² He was instrumental in the formation of the Black Raven pipe band in 1910 and through his influence it went from strength to strength. Mattie McCann, Rover's cousin, was a lifelong member of the band.²³

There were two Volunteer companies in Lusk in 1914, the Irish Volunteers and the Hibernian Rifles with a combined strength of about ninety men. Jealousy between them did not prevent their members from attending the Howth gun-running on Sunday 26 July 1914 when the *Asgard* delivered its cargo of rifles and ammunition into the arms of Volunteers gathered from all over the Dublin area.²⁴ However, it appears that the Lusk Volunteers, unlike those of Skerries, Swords and St Margaret's, fared poorly in the distribution of weapons that Sunday although adequate supplies were procured for them at a later date.²⁵ Known as 'Howth Mausers', the weapons were heavy, cumbersome and severely limited by being single shot and having no magazine yet, in their innocence, the Volunteers were delighted to have them.²⁶ In Lusk parades took place twice a week under the supervision of ex-British Army instructors Murphy and Norton. Wooden weapons were used in training but on other occasions air rifles were used for target practice at the bandroom in Lusk. Exercises also took place with the Swords Volunteers at Broadmeadow estuary and at Lawless's farm at Saucerstown.²⁷ A procurement fund for obtaining rifles, equipment and uniforms required a weekly payment of 3d. by each Volunteer.

When war broke out between Great Britain and Germany in August 1914 the situation in Ireland was dramatically affected by its implications. Popular attention here was distracted by the war and there was an upsurge of pro-British feeling throughout the country. The Irish Parliamentary Party, which should have been forcing the issue of home rule for Ireland, became, instead, little more than a recruiting agent for the British armed forces. John Redmond's Woodenbridge speech in which he encouraged Volunteers to join the fight alongside the British caused a split in the Volunteer movement. The majority went with Redmond (the National Volunteers) while a

²² Sean O'Mahoney, *The first hunger striker, Thomas Ashe 1917* (Dublin, 2001), p. 7.

²³ Maureen McCarthy, Lusk, interviewed by author, 7 June 2003.

²⁴ Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948.

²⁵ Bairbre Curtis, 'Fingal and the Easter Rising 1916' (Diploma dissertation for St Patrick's College, Maynooth, 1998), pp 5-6.

²⁶ Michael McAllister, 'Statement of Michael McAllister', in *Tales of old Fingal* (An Taisce, 1984), p. 56.

²⁷ Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948; Military History Bureau, W.S. 148, statement of James Crenigan, 1948.

minority remained loyal to Patrick Pearse and Eoin McNeill (the Irish Volunteers). According to Charles Weston, Lusk Company, the split in his area was about half and half. In the confused situation after the split, many Volunteers ignored Redmond's suggestion that they join British armed forces. They simply became inactive. Around this time Thomas Ashe formed a section of Irish Volunteers at Turvey using facilities owned by the McAllister family who farmed there. The Turvey half-company consisted of about twelve men who trained in signalling, Morse code and flag communications.²⁸ It was relatively easy to become a member of the Volunteers and, unlike the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) of which Ashe was a member, no oath of allegiance was required.²⁹

In late 1914 distressing news reached the McCann family that Dan's twenty-one year old son, James, then a soldier with the 1st Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles, had fallen at the front-line near Calais on 9 December. The story took a cruel twist when around the same time a British Army field service post card from the dead man arrived at Dan Sherry's home at Lusk informing him that all was well.³⁰ However, all was far from well and by the time the card arrived it was already known that his young life was no more. His nephew, James McCann, now living at the McCann family home in Back Lane, holds a brass plaque awarded posthumously to James. What effect this news had on Rover is not known but it was said that that no animosity existed within the family regarding James's role as a British soldier or Rover's role as a Volunteer for that matter. There were a variety of reasons why young men joined the British Army at that time. Some responded to Redmond's appeal, others wanted adventure or a chance to see the world while others, again, opted for the employment opportunities offered by the armed forces. Why James joined the Dublin Fusiliers is anybody's guess but he was short-changed, drew the short straw and lost his life on a foreign field fighting for what some believed was another man's war. His remains now rest at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Memorial Cemetery at Le Touret, Calais.³¹

Earlier that same year Rover joined the Lusk branch of the Irish National Foresters. Branch no. 1035 was named after former parish priest Fr Tyrell who is remembered by a granite obelisk inside the gates of St Maccullin's chapel, Lusk.³² The branch was officially inaugurated on 19 July 1914 under the auspices of the Dublin district I.N.F and straight away proved a great success. Large contingents of Foresters from Skerries and Balbriggan attended on opening day, the latter with their beautiful banner said to be typical of the I.N.F.. The Lusk Black Raven pipe band attended and with their costume regalia made a most imposing display. John Rooney, chairman of

²⁸ Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948.

²⁹ McAllister, 'Statement', pp 55-68.

³⁰ Field service card in possession of Dympna Sherry, Lusk.

³¹ www.cwgc.org, accessed 28 September 2003.

³² National Library of Ireland, C.O. 904.

the branch, thanked all who attended including several district officials from Skerries for making the effort to ensure the inauguration was a success. He assured everyone that the aim of the branch was to advance the interests of the working classes and his plea that all eligible persons become members was followed by loud applause. Addresses then followed from Chief Rangers P. Doran and J. Mullett after which L. Clarke proposed a vote of thanks. The attendees included the following:

P. Donnelly, R. Hynes, N. Short, M. Devine, P. Brogan, P. Boyle, C. O'Neill, M. Kelly, J. Masterson, Wm. Sherry, M. Kelly, J. Bentley, J. Maypothor, J. Lambe, J. O'Connor, C. Sweetman, J. Sweetman, J. Flanagan (junior), J. Monks, M. Greene, P. Brennan, J. Maypothor, J. Clarke, F. Murphy, R. Peter, J. Daly, T. Peppard, P. Greene, J. Condon, T. McArdle (junior), T. Gallagher, J. Carton, T. Davis, A. Sherwin, J. Fitzsimons, J. Grimes, Wm. Morgan, P. Kelly, R. Maguire, T. Pepper (junior), P. Grimes, J. Norton, J. Lambe, E. Rooney, W. Dixon, J. Gough, T. Donnelly, R. McArdle, J. Devine, M. Condron, L. McGovern, P. McCann, R. McArdle (junior), J. Devine.

A procession led by the pipe band marched to the band room where nearly sixty persons became members of the I.N.F.. From amongst these a committee was formed with the intention of holding meetings on Saturday evenings.³³ Rover's membership card shows that he joined the branch on 23 July 1914 and his subscription for the last quarter of 1914 amounted to £1. 5s. 10d.³⁴

III

After the Volunteer split, a battalion of Irish Volunteers was organised in north County Dublin under the command of Dr Richard Hayes. Thomas Ashe served as battalion adjutant and Frank Lawless was battalion quartermaster. A short time before the Rising Hayes and Ashe swapped their appointments, the former became officer commanding and the latter became adjutant. The companies comprising the battalion were Swords, St Margaret's, Skerries and Lusk. However, all were of skeletal formation and the whole battalion was scarcely a hundred strong. Training and field exercises were sometimes carried out in conjunction with city battalions.³⁵ The companies were collectively known as the North County Brigade or, after the Rising, as the Fingal Brigade. On Easter Sunday, 23 April 1916, an order went out from Patrick Pearse to all brigade commanders instructing them to prepare for a route march and to ensure that the men had sufficient military equipment and rations to last two days. On that day the four companies of the north county battalion assembled, each at its own centre before coming together at Rathbeale Cross, Swords at noon.³⁶ Of the 120 men

³³ *Drogheda Independent*, 25 July 1914.

³⁴ Teresa McCann, Skerries (daughter-in-law of John Rover McCann) interviewed by author, 1 February 2003.

³⁵ McAllister, 'Statement', p. 57.

³⁶ Military Archive, Dublin, John M. Houston, O.P., *Headquarters Battalion Easter Week 1916, the Dublin brigade* (Dublin, n. d.).

who mobilised, the largest contingent came from Skerries.³⁷ However, after a countermanding order from Eoin McNeill, chief executive of the Irish Volunteers, the proceedings were cancelled. A messenger was sent by Commandant Ashe by motorcycle to Liberty Hall to make inquiries regarding the countermand and the messenger returned with news from James Connolly that 'everything is off for now but hold in readiness to act at any moment'.³⁸ The news caused consternation among the Fingal Volunteers who then found themselves waiting aimlessly at Frank Lawless's farmyard at Saucerstown wondering what was to happen next. It was ten o'clock before the men were released for home but they were expected to hold themselves in readiness for a recall at any time in the hours ahead.³⁹ James Crenigan's account gives the time of dismissal as near midnight. The Volunteers cycled homewards dejected and disappointed with the way things had turned out. They wanted to fight, had trained hard for it and were fed up waiting. However, not all were so dejected. Charles Weston attended a dance at Lusk that night only getting to bed at two o'clock the next morning.⁴⁰ McNeill had thrown a spanner in the works completely by disrupting the insurrection plans of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) which had an altogether different agenda to his. The IRB welcomed confrontation while McNeill favoured a more conciliatory approach. However, new orders went out from Pearse overnight to 'strike at one o'clock today'.⁴¹ The order was brought from Dublin by Oldtown Cumann na mBan Volunteer Mary 'Mollie' Adrien who cycled through the night with the dispatch to deliver it at seven o'clock on Easter Monday morning to Joseph Lawless at his Swords home. Adrien was to be involved in carrying dispatches all week up to Saturday.⁴² As soon as Thomas Ashe received the communiqué he immediately ordered a second mobilisation for Knocksedan at ten o'clock. However, of the sixty-three who turned out, most were from Swords. There are several reasons put forward for the poor turnout on Monday. Poor communications with individual Volunteers was one factor. Others chose to stay away because they were angry that McNeill had been treated badly and effectively forced to resign.⁴³ Several reasons account for the absence of the Skerries men who had mustered almost to a man on the first mobilisation but failed to turn out on the second. Firstly, according to Skerries Volunteer Matthias Derham, they were ordered to remain in the town in anticipation of an attack on the

³⁷ Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948.

³⁸ Military Archive, Dublin, John M. Houston, O.P., *Headquarters Battalion Easter Week 1916, the Dublin brigade* (Dublin, n. d.).

³⁹ Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948.

⁴⁰ Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948.

⁴¹ Sean O'Luing, *I die in a good cause* (Dublin, 1972), p. 77.

⁴² Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948; Military Archive Dublin, John M. Houston, O.P., *Headquarters Battalion Easter Week 1916, the Dublin brigade* (Dublin, n. d.); Sinead McCooole, *No ordinary women, Irish female activists in the revolutionary years, 1900-1923* (Dublin, 2004), p. 34.

⁴³ McAllister, 'Statement', p. 60.

Marconi radio station by Ashe and his fabled hundreds.⁴⁴ Secondly, after getting wind of such an attack, the loyalists of Skerries panicked and as a consequence 200 soldiers of the North Staffordshire regiment were transported to the town aboard the warship *Boadiciea*.⁴⁵ The soldiers took up defensive positions around the town and imposed a curfew similar to that already imposed on Dublin.⁴⁶ As a consequence of delaying their flight out of Skerries, about twenty men fell foul of a military round-up early in the week and were effectively taken out of circulation.⁴⁷ Derham and several others did manage to join the brigade near Ashbourne later in the week albeit after the fight there was over.

Ashe's first action was to send Joseph Lawless and a group of Volunteers with a motorcycle laden with explosives to Rush to blow the railway bridge at Rogerstown. Along the way they met Ned Rooney with Volunteers from Lusk who joined Lawless's party.⁴⁸ Rover is believed to have been among the Lusk contingent that day.⁴⁹ The attempt to destroy the bridge proved less than successful. A surging tide prevented explosives being attached to the bridge buttresses and there was insufficient dynamite for the job in hand.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Ashe, in a pre-arranged plan, moved into a defensive camp south of Finglas village. The Rogerstown group subsequently made their way to Finglas. Ashe's orders were to act independently and cause maximum disruption in Fingal in the hope that he would distract the military authorities and draw forces from the city, thereby relieving pressure on Volunteer garrisons there.⁵¹ He implemented his orders by leading his small force of men across the fields and roads of Fingal to attack the RIC barracks at Donabate and by attempting to demolish the rail bridge at Rogerstown. Within the ranks of Ashe's group were some of Fingal's best and bravest sons, McAllisters, Westons and Kellys. Four Lawless brothers shouldered their guns and marched alongside Taylors, Wilsons and Doyles who, in the person of Paddy Doyle, maintained the link with the rebellion of 1798. Black Raven bandmen were represented as was nineteen-year-old Thomas Rafferty who could not ordinarily join in the company's manoeuvres because he was employed on the government Remount Farm. Also there were Jack Crenigan and Rover McCann, the latter described by John McAllister as the 'bravest man a country ever had'.⁵²

⁴⁴ Francis Whearity, 'Matthias Derham 1883-1959, Irish volunteer', paper presented to Skerries Historical Society 11 November 2003; Memoir of Matthias Derham in the possession of Lillie Derham, Church Street, Skerries.

⁴⁵ Daire Bruniciardi, *The Sea Hound* (Cork, 2001), p. 41.

⁴⁶ Desmond Ryan, *The Easter Rising 1916* (Dublin, 1949), p.219.

⁴⁷ David Fitzpatrick, 'Skerries and the Rising of Easter week 1916', paper delivered to Skerries Historical Society, 1949; N.L.L., p. 7632.

⁴⁸ Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948.

⁴⁹ Testimony of Teresa McCann (daughter-in-law of Rover).

⁵⁰ Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948.

⁵¹ Military Archive, Dublin, John M. Houston, O.P., *Headquarters Battalion Easter Week 1916, the Dublin brigade* (Dublin, n. d.).

⁵² *Ibid.*

As a consequence of the damage to the rail line, some of the principal speakers expected at a war recruitment rally at Skerries could not attend although the event took place anyway.⁵³ It had been thought that the rebels of Lusk, a place with a reputation as a hotbed of Sinn Feiners, had a definite plan to attack Skerries.⁵⁴ Although no such attack took place, the belief in it appears to have been well founded since two different sources relate that such an event was considered by Ashe during the first days of Easter week. Derham advances this as the reason why the Skerries men did not muster at the second mobilisation. Charles Weston also makes reference to such a plan in his deposition to the Military History Bureau in 1948. In any event, once the soldiers arrived in Skerries any such plan went out the window and the brigade went elsewhere. From Tuesday, raids were carried out on RIC barracks at Donabate and Swords where additional arms and ammunition were obtained. On the following day another attempt was made to damage the bridge at Rogerstown but this, too, appears to have failed.⁵⁵ This activity took place against a background of fierce fighting in Dublin city of which the Fingal Volunteers knew little. Due to an urgent need for more manpower, Connolly instructed Ashe to send forty men to join the city garrisons. However, only half that number could be spared and these left on Tuesday under the command of Captain Richard Coleman.⁵⁶ The remaining forty-five Volunteers attacked Garristown barracks but, surprisingly, got no arms there. Telegraph poles were cut at every opportunity in order to hinder enemy communications. Food was commandeered as necessary and a lamb from Craigies's farm at Finglas provided a meal that many of the men claimed was the best they had ever had.⁵⁷

Due to the low number of Volunteers who mustered, it was decided to discard the old British infantry methods familiar to the men from training and to adopt a scheme more suited to the numbers of men available and the tactical requirements of their mission. The new arrangement, which 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 constituted the headquarters and command staff. The operational procedure adopted was that each day one section was detailed for foraging duty, tasked with protecting the camp during the day and night and locating and procuring food supplies for the column. The remaining three sections proceeding on the daily or other mission moving always with the sections so spaced and detailed that the leading section constituted the advance guard and was

⁵³ O'Luing, *I die in a good cause* (Dublin, 1972), p. 80.

⁵⁴ David Fitzpatrick, 'Skerries and the Rising of Easter week 1916', paper delivered to Skerries Historical Society 1949.

⁵⁵ Joseph Lawless, 'The Battle of Ashbourne', in *Dublin's Fighting Story* (Tralee, 1950), p. 60; *Sinn Fein Rebellion handbook*, p. 37.

⁵⁶ James Crenigan, testimony to Military History Bureau 1948: O'Luing, *I die in a good cause* (Dublin, 1972), p. 81.

⁵⁷ O'Luing, *I die in a good cause* (Dublin, 1972), p. 81

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 on a daily basis. The commander and staff of the column were a fortunate combination and were largely, if not entirely, responsible for the successful exploits of the unit including the victory at the Ashbourne battle. The successful partnership was between Thomas Ashe and Richard Mulcahy, a straggler from a city garrison and already known to the members of the company. He was noted for being cool, clear-headed and practical and with a personality and tact that enabled him to control situations without in any way undermining Ashe's prestige as commander.⁵⁸

After breaking camp at Borranstown on Friday, 28 April, the brigade attacked the RIC barracks at Ashbourne, County Meath. At first the police would not surrender and replied with a hail of bullets. However, after a thirty-minute siege they surrendered to Ashe's men. Just as they were taking possession of the barracks, police reinforcements from Navan arrived via Slane. Ashe had to act quickly and, placing his men to best advantage, he attacked the RIC motorcade. The ensuing battle lasted over five hours and courage and discipline told for the Fingal men in the end.⁵⁹ After the police surrendered they received medical attention from Dr Richard Hayes with the assistance of Volunteer Mollie Adrien.⁶⁰ After a warning from Ashe not to be found in arms again, the police were sent on their way. Casualties were taken on both sides with at least eight policemen and two Volunteers killed (John Crenigan and Thomas Rafferty).⁶¹ Three civilians lost their lives that day and these are often overlooked when accounts of the battle are recalled. Jim Brown, carpenter and undertaker from Lusk, took young Rafferty's body back to the village for burial.⁶² In his last dispatch from Volunteer headquarters at the General Post Office, Dublin, on 28 April 1916, Irish Citizen Army leader James Connolly praised the actions of the Fingal brigade:

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.⁶³

Near the site of the battle at Rath Cross now stands a limestone monument to the Volunteers of 1916 that was unveiled in 1959 by President Sean T. O'Kelly in the

⁵⁸ Joseph Lawless 'Fight at Ashbourne', in *Dublin's fighting story* (Tralee, 1950), pp 60-61.

⁵⁹ Sean O'Mahoney, *The first hunger striker, Thomas Ashe 1917* (Dublin, 2001), p. 10.

⁶⁰ *Irish Press*, 20 July 1949; *Drogheda Independent*, 23 July 1949; Francis Whearity, 'The Life and Times of Mary Mollie Adrien, 1873-1949: *Cumann na mBan* volunteer 1916', presented to Skerries Historical Society, 12 September 2006.

⁶¹ Terence Dooley, 'Alexander 'Baby' Grey (1858-1916) and the Battle of Ashbourne, 28 April 1916' in *Riocht na Midhe*, xiv (Meath, 2003), pp 194-229.

⁶² Oral testimony of Jim Brown (Snr.), Lusk, 24 July 2003; Oral testimony of Margaret (Greta) Haslam (author's mother-in-law) late of Haystown, Rush, 25 December 2002.

⁶³ Max Caulfield, *The Easter Rebellion* (Great Britain, 1963), pp 311-312.

presence of many dignitaries. The design is based around the theme of Ashe's poem, *Let me carry your cross for Ireland, Lord*.⁶⁴

By Saturday the situation in the city had become dire and Pearse had established a new headquarters at 16 Moore Street. His concern for mounting civilian casualties caused him to issue an order for a general surrender with immediate effect.⁶⁵ The news came to the Fingal Volunteers on Sunday by way of RIC Sergeant Reilly from Swords and Head Constable Keely of Balbriggan.⁶⁶ Ashe sent messengers by motorcycle into the city to confirm the news which they duly did on their return. The immediate reaction to the news was to treat it with derision and catcalls and shouts of trickery were the order of the day. Some wanted to fight on but Mulcahy reminded them that they had come out as soldiers, had behaved as such, that Pearse was proud of them and that his order could not be ignored. His words calmed the men and they made preparations for their arrest. Soon after a cavalry escort of South Wales Lancers arrived to convey them to Swords. According to Charles Weston, the Lancers were very fair in the treatment of the Volunteer group.⁶⁷ Minus a few who slipped away, the Volunteers were taken to Swords and thence by motor lorry to Richmond Barracks, Dublin. All were arrested under the terms of the Defence of the Realm Act (1914).⁶⁸ Rover's charge sheet carried the following details:

Notice to persons with respect to whom an order is made under the regulations.
Name of prisoner: John McCann.
Address: Lusk, County Dublin.
War Office no. 626B.
Home Office no. 315367.

Notice is hereby given to the above named prisoner that an Order has been made by the Secretary of State under regulations 14 B, of the Defence of the Realm Regulations directing that he 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 may 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 principals 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 preceded 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 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.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Joseph Lawless 'Fight at Ashbourne', in *Dublin's fighting story* (Tralee, 1950), pp 60-66.

⁶⁵ Seamus Scully, 'Moore Street 1916' in *Dublin Historical Record*, xxxix, no.2 (Dublin, March 1986), pp 53-63.

⁶⁶ Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948.

⁶⁷ McAllister, 'Statement', pp 64-65.

⁶⁸ N.L.I., MSS 8442-8445.

⁶⁹ Arrest warrant in possession of Teresa McCann, Skerries.

In order to classify detainees relative to their threat to the security of the realm, the then chief secretary to Ireland, Augustine Birrell, ordered that each prisoner be categorised into one of three classes, A, B or C. Rover was rated in category B which implied that he was deemed a medium-risk prisoner deserving of punishment but not as severe as that reserved for class A prisoners. It was noted that most B-rated detainees had taken part in the rebellion and it was recommended that their release should be delayed until local police had reviewed each case. Interestingly, no releases were to take place if any German soldiers had landed in Ireland in the interim period.⁷⁰ This latter stipulation gives an indication of British fears that Germany might use Ireland as a bridgehead to mount an attack on their country.

After interrogation in the gymnasium of Richmond Barracks, a group of prisoners, including Rover, were removed to the North Wall on 2 May and put into the cattle section of a boat bound for Holyhead. Others in the group were: C. Weston (Turvey), B. McAllister (Donabate), S. McDonnell (Skerries), E. Stafford (Swords), W. Doyle (Lissenhall), J. O'Rafferty (Lusk), E. Rooney (Lusk), T. Seaver (Lusk), M. Derham (Skerries), R. Aungier (Lusk), T. Kelly (Corduff), J. Masterson (Lusk), J. Rooney (Lusk), J. Devine (Lusk), J. Lawless (Swords), P. Brogan (Collinstown), J. Kelly (Skerries) and J. Kelly (Corduff). After an uncomfortable journey during which morale was maintained by singing, the entire group were lodged in Knutsford Prison in the English Midlands on the following day.⁷¹ Conditions there were pretty grim for the Irish prisoners who were kept in solitary confinement with no bed or blankets and had only a small stool to sit on. No talking was allowed during the one-hour exercise period. The food was neither sufficient nor palatable and Weston relates how men craved home-cooked food all the time, even in their sleep. They were allowed a bath and haircut after a week in prison but had to wait a further two weeks to hear Mass during which some conversation was allowed.⁷² Rover and the others remained there until at least 9 June when Frongoch camp at Bala in North Wales was ready to receive the Irish prisoners. The camp, a former whiskey distillery, had been cleared of German prisoners to make way for the Irish⁷³ It was split into two sections known as the South and North Camps. Rover was put in North Camp and accommodated in wooden huts number two and five which he shared with fellow Lusk men, Dick Kelly, James Masterson and John Rooney, the former chairman of Lusk I.N.F.⁷⁴ The men had plenty of leisure time due to their refusal to work and they could pass the time as they saw fit. Physical games and card-playing were popular but Rover liked to carve bones.

⁷⁰ National Archives, CSORP 15564/16.

⁷¹ *Irish Times*, 12 May 1916; *Evening Herald*, 12 May 1916.

⁷² Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948.

⁷³ Sean O'Mahoney, *Frongoch: university of revolution* (Dublin, 1987), p. 24.

⁷⁴ *Evening Herald*, 12 May 1916; N.L.I. Ms 1650.

One, in the shape of a holy water font, he took home to his wife.⁷⁵ An inscription on the carving reads 'Frongoch 1916'. Annie later donated it to Kilmainham Gaol Museum where it is now displayed in the exhibition hall.⁷⁶ At some point during Rover's internment the authorities removed groups of prisoners from Frongoch and brought them to Wandsworth Prison, London, holding them there for about a week. Charles Weston was transported there with a group of Lusk men and brought before the Sankey Commission for interrogation.⁷⁷ This being the case it is not unreasonable to believe that Rover was similarly treated. The object of the London exercise was to bring each Volunteer before Lord Justice Sankey for questioning as to why he had taken part in the rebellion. The interviews, however, lasted only approximately fifteen minutes primarily because of the uncooperative attitude of the prisoners. As a consequence there was a general feeling that the exercise was a complete waste of time. Furthermore, many prisoners thought of it as a holiday to London and considered it the highlight of their entire trip to Britain. This was hardly what Sankey had intended.⁷⁸

IV

Released in December 1916, Rover, along with Lusk Volunteer Dick Aungier, called to see Dan Sherry before Christmas.⁷⁹ The Volunteers returned to a different Ireland; a country that had witnessed the execution of the leaders of the insurrection during a horrific period between 3 and 12 May 1916. 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. Ordinary people were repulsed by this brutal savagery and as a consequence even the foot soldiers of the Irish Volunteers were seen in a different light. People began to think that maybe they were not the evil ruthless men the authorities had made them out to be.⁸⁰ Richard Mulcahy claimed that by sending them to prison the authorities had made heroes of them all.⁸¹ General Maxwell's actions were judged to have been excessive in the extreme and in places such as Lusk, which had a high concentration of men involved in the Rising, the feelings of revulsion towards the authorities must have been particularly strong. With many of the leaders of the rebellion now gone, only de Valera and Ashe remained. The latter was under lock and key in Pentonville Prison with a sentence of death hanging

⁷⁵ Teresa McCann interviewed by author, 3 May 2003; Sean O'Mahoney, *Frongoch: university of revolution* (Dublin, 1987), p. 91.

⁷⁶ Niamh O'Sullivan, Archivist, Kilmainham Gaol Museum, interviewed by author, 18 January 2003.

⁷⁷ Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948.

⁷⁸ Sean O'Mahoney, *Frongoch: university of revolution* (Dublin 1987), p. 48, pp 145-156.

⁷⁹ Billy Sherry, Lusk, interviewed by author, 7 June 2003.

⁸⁰ Brian Barton, *From behind closed doors* (Belfast, 2002), p. 90.

⁸¹ Military History Bureau, W.S. 149, statement of Charles Weston, 7 October 1948.

over his head. However, he was later released during a general amnesty in 1917.⁸² Ordinary Volunteers just wanted to lick their wounds and pick up the thread of their lives as best they could. Money had to be earned and some returned to their original employments if that option was there.

Rover married his sweetheart Annie Cosgrove on 23 May 1917 at St Maur's chapel, Rush. The best man was Christopher McCann and Annie had Alice McCann as chief bridesmaid. Fr Lawrence O'Byrne, P.P., officiated.⁸³ The groom received a present of a fob watch inscribed 'On the occasion of your marriage from your comrades in Lusk Company IRA'.⁸⁴ The couple went to live with Annie's parents at Quay Lane, Rush. Annie's father, Thomas Cosgrove, was a sailor and market gardener while her mother, Mary Bissett, is believed to have come from Skerries.⁸⁵ Annie was known locally as 'Little Annie' because another woman in the village with the same surname was known as 'Big Annie'.⁸⁶ In December 1917 Rover started a new job as a general labourer with the roads department of Dublin County Council. This was a definite improvement on the type of work that he had been doing up till then. He was soon in a better position to support his wife and to contemplate starting a family. He joined the Irish Transport and General Workers Union on 22 December 1917, probably through the influence of Thomas Monks, union branch secretary and a Lusk man. The union subscription was 1s. 3d. and Rover made his last payment on 20 November 1920 just two days before his death.⁸⁷ The couple's first child, Daniel, was born on 1 May 1918 and the following year saw the birth of another son, Thomas, on 2 September.

In 1919 the War of Independence commenced when an IRA flying column killed two policemen at Soloheadbeg, County Tipperary, thus causing panic among members of the RIC who now saw themselves as targets of the IRA. Morale in the police force plummeted, the number of resignations increased and the authorities could not find new recruits to replace the loss of experienced men. In order to restore the numerical strength of the force, ex-military men sourced in Britain were shipped to Ireland in early 1920.⁸⁸ These became known as 'Black and Tans', a name that was to become synonymous with fear, hatred and loathing in Ireland. A force of 500 was based at Gormanston military camp, County Meath. They appear to have enjoyed the local amenities and during leisure times used visit nearby Laytown to take the sea air and swim.⁸⁹ In common with people everywhere, the soldiers enjoyed an occasional drink. However, a report from the Kells area of County Meath suggests that after

⁸² Sean O'Mahoney, *The first hunger striker, Thomas Ashe 1917* (Dublin, 2001), p. 17.

⁸³ Marriage certificate of Jack and Annie McCann in possession of Teresa McCann, Skerries.

⁸⁴ Rover's watch in possession of Jack McCann, Galway.

⁸⁵ Michael Cosgrove, Rush, interviewed by author, 28 May 2003.

⁸⁶ Margaret McCann-Moore, Rush, interviewed by author, 7 June 2003.

⁸⁷ Union card in possession of Teresa McCann, Skerries.

⁸⁸ Military Archive, Dublin, A/0415.

⁸⁹ *Drogheda Independent*, 18 September 1920.

drinking a favourite tippie known as 'bally-hoolie lemonade' Black and Tan high jinks often erupted into trouble of a rather unpleasant kind which affected anyone unfortunate to be nearby at the time.⁹⁰ The Black and Tans were particularly interested in those who had taken part in the Easter Rising or were imprisoned for political reasons. They began calling at selected homes late at night, often accompanied by policemen with local knowledge. Right from the start it could be seen that their intentions were not good. Evidence of this emerged in September 1920 when Black and Tans overstepped the mark and sacked Balbriggan, County Dublin. Much damage was done and two townsmen James Lawless and John Gibbons were tortured to death and their bodies thrown on the street.⁹¹ In late October further destruction (including the burning of Matthias Derham's home at Church Street) took place in Skerries albeit on a smaller scale than Balbriggan but once again a young life was lost when twenty-one year old Terence Sherlock was murdered.⁹²

Further up the coast the town of Rush had been relatively unaffected till then but Volunteers there feared they would soon receive the attention that had been visited upon other Fingal towns. They sought somewhere safe to shelter, rest and sleep. A vacant house at Lower Main Street was made available by a local family who were sympathetic to their plight.⁹³ At first sight it would seem that the refuge was too near the RIC barracks for comfort but the police appear to have ignored it and did not interfere with the Volunteers there. At this time the RIC were a force under siege and through a general feeling of vulnerability were sometimes inclined to turn a blind eye to republican activities so as to not to draw attention from the widely active IRA flying columns. The RIC in Rush had already received such attention and perhaps had no wish for further encounters with what was then a formidable force. The event alluded to occurred on Thursday, 29 April 1920, at two-thirty in the morning when a raiding party of up to one hundred IRA Volunteers discharged a barrage of rifle shots at the RIC barracks. Among the raiding party was Skerries man Jack McGowan.⁹⁴ The sergeant and the few constables stationed in the building returned fire. Within minutes Sergeant Brady, a married man, was wounded in both legs. After the attackers fled Brady was brought to a Dublin hospital where he died on the following Sunday.⁹⁵ The refuge on Main Street became less safe after the Black and Tans began visiting Rush on their night-time raids and other hideaways were needed. A shed in Coyle's field near the stream at Skerries

⁹⁰ *Drogheda Independent*, 17 July 1920.

⁹¹ Military Archive, Dublin, *The last post: details and stories of republican dead, 1913-1925*.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Jimmy Murray, Main Street, Rush, interviewed by author, 1 July 2003.

⁹⁴ Francis Whearity, 'John Jack McGowan 1900-1922, Irish volunteer', paper presented to Skerries Historical Society January 2006.

⁹⁵ *Drogheda Independent*, 15 May 1920; Francis Whearity, 'John Jack McGowan 1900-1922, Irish Volunteer', paper presented to Skerries Historical Society, January 2006.

Road was sometimes used.⁹⁶ Another place used by men on the run was a field at the 'Drummonds' at Whitestown where high ground afforded all-round visibility and less risk from a surprise attack.⁹⁷ The Rush men received information about the movements of the military from Cecilia McCann, a local woman who worked in a Balbriggan hosiery factory.⁹⁸ Rover's wife was then in the late stages of her third pregnancy and he found it very hard to remain away, especially at night. He was, however, regularly advised by fellow Volunteers Patrick Weldon and Kit Mackey of the risk he was taking by staying at home but he seemed to take little notice and only stayed out occasionally.⁹⁹ Perhaps Annie was having a difficult pregnancy but even so she did have her mother Mary to assist her so she should have been all right. Only Rover knew why he stayed at home instead of hiding out with the others. He may have thought that the military were not interested in him and that the risk was a small one. He was soon to find out just how wrong that assumption was.

On Sunday, 21 November 1920, there was an escalation of violence in Dublin when, having gained entry to Croke Park where a football match was in progress, the military began shooting into the crowd. Deaths and injuries occurred as a result, including a player on the pitch.¹⁰⁰ The incident appears to have been a reprisal for the murder of Dublin Castle intelligence officers earlier that day by a party of IRA under the direction of its head of intelligence, Michael Collins. Notwithstanding the commotion in the city, for Rover it was just an ordinary Sunday to be enjoyed with his family. November brought darkness early to the unlit streets of Rush and people retired indoors for the night. The scene, though a peaceful one, was deceptive and not everyone was at ease after the events in the city. Kit Mackey was aware that the military might come looking for revenge at any time. For safety reasons he stayed out with others that night but Rover was not among them having yet again decided to remain at home.¹⁰¹ While the occupants of the Cosgrove household slept, Mackey's fears were realised when the lights of a Crossley tender lit up the town as it turned left on Main Street in the direction of the harbour. Realising that their intention might be to call at Cosgrove's home looking for Rover, Kit ran from his hiding place amongst the cauliflowers over the rough ground to try to raise the alarm but the soldiers got there first and he had to make a hasty retreat for his own safety.¹⁰² Mackey may have been known to the authorities because the following February soldiers raiding Lusk inquired

⁹⁶ Tomás Hand, Hackettstown, Skerries, interviewed by author, 9 June 2003.

⁹⁷ Jimmy Butterly, Blake's Cross, Lusk, interviewed by author, 2 July 2003.

⁹⁸ Ceppie and Moss Weldon, Rush, interviewed by author, 14 June 2003.

⁹⁹ Patrick Weldon, Rush, interviewed by author, 11 April 2003.

¹⁰⁰ *Drogheda Independent*, 27 November 1920.

¹⁰¹ Oral testimony of Patrick Weldon, Rush, 13 August 2003.

¹⁰² Ceppie Weldon, Rush, interviewed by author, 14 June 2003; Teresa McCann, Skerries, interviewed by author, 15 June 2003.

after a man of that name along with a Mr Archbald but failed to find either of them.¹⁰³ In any event the latter individual was in America at the time.

The military party that arrived at Cosgrove's door had come by way of the town of Skerries where they had already shot the labour representative P. Matthews twice in front of his wife and daughter and left him for dead. Fortunately, with the help of Dr Healy who lived nearby, he pulled through.¹⁰⁴ The raiders knocked on Cosgrove's door at two-thirty on the morning of 22 November 1920 and demanded that Rover come down at once. On hearing the commotion he called out that he would be there in a minute whereupon a voice warned him to hurry up. As soon as he reached the bottom of the stairs he was bundled outside while his mother-in-law pleaded with them to release him saying that his wife was about to give birth. They ignored her pleas, claiming that he was only wanted for questioning. Rover had already assured his wife that he would be all right as the military had no reason to harm him. Whether he believed those words or was only trying to placate her is unclear. Perhaps he underestimated the people in whose custody he now found himself and was unaware of how ruthless they were. Without further delay he was taken away into the darkness of Harford's field where shots rang out in the night sky. Death must have been instantaneous as two bullets penetrated the heart and another two passed in close proximity. The grass where he lay was soaked with blood but there was no evidence of a struggle.¹⁰⁵ In a cottage nearby, the sleeping seven-year-old Margaret Harford was awakened by the gunshots. Looking out her window she saw lights outside Cosgrove's house and wondered what was happening and, although very afraid, she instinctively knew that something bad had occurred. Margaret is now a great age but says that the memory of that night will never leave her mind as long as she lives.¹⁰⁶

At dawn, four fishermen brought McCann's body into Cosgrove's house where it was laid out for Fr Skehan to administer the last rites. The atmosphere in the house was one of utter misery as the occupants huddled around the fireplace, inconsolable in their grief.¹⁰⁷ Rover's death should not have caused undue surprise since the deaths of other Volunteers in similar circumstances made it plain that the Black and Tans were not interested in taking prisoners.¹⁰⁸ The question of informers often arises after such events but is rarely capable of being answered, much less proved. Mary Cosgrove believed she knew the voice of one of the party and thought it might belong to a local policeman but she did not name him publicly. McCann's funeral was entrusted to the

¹⁰³ *Drogheda Independent*, 19 February 1921.

¹⁰⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 23 November 1920.

¹⁰⁵ *Drogheda Independent*, 27 November 1920; *Freeman's Journal*, 23 November 1920.

¹⁰⁶ Margaret and William Halpin, Rush, interviewed by author, 5 April 2003.

¹⁰⁷ *Drogheda Independent*, 27 November 1920.

¹⁰⁸ Francis Whearity, 'Thomas Hand 1878-1920, Irish Volunteer', in *Time and Tide 4* (Skerries Historical Society, 2004); Francis Whearity 'John Terry Sherlock 1897-1920, Irish Volunteer', paper delivered to Skerries Historical Society, June 2002.

care of local undertaker Joseph McGlew. McGlew was a carpenter and, in common with others in that trade, made coffins in his workshop which was known locally as the 'coffin shed'.¹⁰⁹ Few details regarding the funeral arrangements are known but it probably took place within a day or two after his death. The body was conveyed on a wooden bier by family, friends and neighbours, assisted by his IRA comrades from Rush and Lusk. When the cortège, accompanied by the Rush fife and drum band, reached the railway bridge near Lusk, an Irish tricolour was draped over the coffin and the procession continued on its way accompanied by the Lusk Black Raven pipe band to the old cemetery at Lusk.¹¹⁰ It is not clear whether the IRA attended. These were troubled times and, in the light of the recent events in the city and county, the situation was extremely tense. After the deaths in Balbriggan in September the military authorities there made it clear that repercussions would follow any show of military honours at the funeral of Lawless and Gibbon.¹¹¹ Perhaps in view of this threat the IRA may have stayed away from Lusk. On 6 December 1920, fifteen days after losing her husband, Annie McCann gave birth to her third child, Sean. Still in deep shock from her bereavement she had to fight through the tears of her despair in order to bring forth a new life 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 parents' support during that terribly traumatic period in her life.

An official board of inquiry was established at Rush to examine 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 person or persons unknown, with intent to murder'.¹¹² The verdict was not surprising as it was the stock response regularly given by inquiry boards when deliberating upon the deaths of republicans at the hands of the military, Black and Tans or otherwise. It conveniently covered up the true circumstances of the evil deeds carried out by military personnel and had little bearing on what actually happened in McCann's case. He was murdered by crown forces in cold blood outside his own home.¹¹³ In any event, the board's decisions were final and no appeals were entertained.¹¹⁴

Two medals were issued posthumously to honour McCann's involvement in the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence. The first bears his name and serial number 386 while the second is inscribed with the serial number 1029.¹¹⁵ In 1967 he was

¹⁰⁹ Oral testimony of Margaret McCann-Moore, Rush, 9 July 2003.

¹¹⁰ Pat and John Kelly, Lusk, interviewed by author, 6 July 2003.

¹¹¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 24 September 1920.

¹¹² Death certificate in possession of Teresa McCann, Skerries.

¹¹³ Military Archive, Dublin, A/0415.

¹¹⁴ Military Archive, Dublin, A/0417.

¹¹⁵ Medals in possession of Mary McAuley, Drogheda, County Louth.

further honoured by the erection of memorial headstone over his grave. The inscription reads:

Erected by the people of Fingal to the memory of Lieut, John McCann IRA. Who died for Ireland 22 November 1920. *Go ndéana dia trócaire ar a Anam.*

At the unveiling ceremony Fr Warner, P.P., led the prayers for the repose of the soul before a large attendance.¹¹⁶ A second memorial stone, similarly inscribed, was erected in the following year near his home at Quay Lane, Rush. The fact that the costs associated with the memorials were borne chiefly by the people of the area is an indication of the measure of their affection and desire to commemorate him. A committee known as the 'John McCann Memorial Committee' organised the collection of subscriptions, its principal officers including J. Archbold, J. Clerkin, T. Jones, T. Langan, C. Mackey, R. McCann, L. Price, T. Peppard and P. Weldon.¹¹⁷

Although John McCann was a simple labourer, he lacked nothing in bravery or courage. He fought alongside notable figures like Thomas Ashe and Richard Mulcahy and participated in the Fingal Brigade's successes in north County Dublin during Easter week 1916. John McAllister's claim that 'he was the bravest man a country ever had' is an indication of the respect in which Rover was held in the area and a fitting epitaph for a man who fought against his country's oppressor and who made the highest sacrifice by laying down his life for his beliefs.

¹¹⁶ *Drogheda Independent*, 27 January 1967.

¹¹⁷ *Drogheda Independent*, 27 January 1967.

Explanatory Note

The 'Fingal Brigade' in the 1916 period was not a brigade but instead was a battalion, though some sources referred to it erroneously in the former sense. The correct term was, and is the Fifth Battalion of the Dublin Brigade in 1916.