

# Bloody Sunday in the Punjab

FOR the Irish, Easter is a time of renewal and rebirth. It's about the turning of the year and the ability of humans to re-create themselves and their nation.

This time of the year is also significant for many of our neighbours. Last weekend was Baisakhi, the Sikh New Year. The celebrations are ancient. However, since 1919, it has been stained indelibly by British butchery.

This time of the year affords an opportunity for every Irish person in multi-cultural Britain to reflect on what happened to the Sikhs and the role that two of our own played in the massacre of Amritsar — the Sikhs' Bloody Sunday.

Despite the protestations of romantic nationalists, the Irish response to colonialism followed the general historical pattern, in that a large segment of native Irish society became blatantly assimilationist, cleansing themselves of Irishness and embracing British culture and British ideas as the superior way of life.

The Sikhs' darkest hour was created by two such Irishmen — Sir Michael O'Dwyer, governor of the Punjab, and General Rex Dyer.

## Indignation

When the British government decided to replace the Defence of India Act, the result was the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919. This legislation provoked indignation throughout India. A campaign of civil disobedience ensued. Among those closely monitoring events was Irishman Sir Michael O'Dwyer.

O'Dwyer had taunted the Indians that Gandhi's 'soul force' would be met with 'fist force'. He had already gained a reputation for sending insurgents to the gallows or to prison for lengthy periods.

April 9 was the annual festival of Ram Naumi, when Hindus paraded their deities through the streets to drums and music. However, in 1919, the festival was also attended by Moslems in a show of national solidarity against the repression that they were suffering at the hands of the Raj. This was especially worrying for the British administration as religious bigotry was seen as an important plank of colonial policy.

O'Dwyer then ordered the arrest and deportation of two nationalist leaders. These deportations proved to be a disastrous move which showed how little the legislators understood those they were ruling.

A large crowd in Amritsar demonstrated against the deportations. Troops opened fire, killing 25 people. Many of the dead were shot

**‘All Indians, no matter their rank, had to ‘salaam’ — bow and scrape — to any passing European’**

in the back as they tried to run away. The crowd, enraged, destroyed anything that could be associated as having anything to do with British rule.

On arrival in the city, General Rex Dyer ordered all "ringleaders" to be rounded up. O'Dwyer thought that these troops should be used to "make an example". Dyer was the perfect man for the job. The product

of the British involvement in both India and Ireland, he had been born in India but schooled at Midleton College, Co. Cork. He was a professional soldier who served in both countries, controlling both colonies for the Crown. Soldiering wasn't his first choice as a profession. He went to the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin, but he was sickened by the atmosphere of the dissecting room! In the Punjab he was to show no such squeamishness.

O'Dwyer imposed a clampdown on news releases. What did appear was heavily censored. Even the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, had been kept in the dark. In the days that followed there was little reportage in the British press. O'Dwyer backed up his man on the ground — General Dyer — to the hilt, stating that: "The Amritsar business cleared the air, and if there was to be a holocaust ... it was best in Amritsar."



**FORCEFUL LEADERSHIP:** Tipperaryman Sir Michael O'Dwyer, Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab in 1919, was intent on meeting Gandhi's 'soul force' with 'fist force'.

On Sunday, April 13 — Baisakhi Day — thousands of pilgrims descended on the city of Amritsar to bathe in the pool of immortality and worship in the Golden Temple. Few could afford hotels, so the Jallianwalla Bagh, a public garden, became a popular meeting and resting place.

Dyer ordered a small force of men to be mustered. By this time the crowd at the Jallianwalla Bagh was vast — estimates on the day vary between 15,000 and 50,000.

## Total panic

Suddenly soldiers appeared through the narrow passage at the end of the garden and began to spread out. General Dyer shouted: "Fire!" The 50 soldiers knelt, aimed their rifles and fired a volley of shots into the centre of the crowd.

Total panic broke out with people running to the walls and trying to clamber out. Sgt. Anderson, General Dyer's personal bodyguard, later recalled that there was no attempt by the crowd to rush the troops. The firing was so organised that, no matter what direction the pilgrims tried to flee, they were trapped. Many died from suffocation and being trampled in the panic. Others miraculously survived, protected from the bullets by the bodies of the dead and the dying. In one narrow passage approximately 150 bodies were found heaped on top of each other.

General Dyer is reported to have left the scene of the slaughter, walking briskly to his waiting car without as much as a backward glance at the carnage. He stated that he was pleased that some had escaped, for it would serve to warn others of the consequences of rebellion. At the end of the day more than 1,500 men, women and children lay dead or wounded.

reception in Derry after Bloody Sunday?

As in Ireland at the time, the civil courts were suspended in the martial law areas. "Summary courts" were set up with flogging the staple punishment for just about anything that came before these courts — to be Indian in one of these courts was to be guilty. The conviction rates rivalled today's Diplock courts in the North of Ireland — 108 were sentenced to death, 264 to transportation for life and forfeiture of all goods. Old and young were treated alike for "waging war against the king" — the accused included an 11-year-old boy and a man aged 115! As with the sentences passed by military courts after Easter Week in Dublin, trials were in camera only and the sentences reported in the newspapers.

## Anxious

Westminster had become anxious to defuse the entire situation. An inquiry was set up under Lord Hunter, the former Solicitor-General of Scotland. The cross-examination concentrated upon the fact that Dyer did not order the crowd to disperse. In fact he disclosed that it didn't really matter what the crowd did that day at the Bagh: "My mind was made up ... If my orders were not obeyed ... I would fire immediately."

It was pointed out to General Dyer that he gave no orders whatsoever to the crowd, but simply turned up with his troops and started firing. Furthermore, as soon as the crowd was fired upon, it began to disperse in panic, yet the firing went on for over ten minutes. He admitted that he could have dispersed the crowd without firing at all. When he was questioned why he didn't do this he stated: "If I could not disperse them for some time, then they would have come back and laughed at me and I would have been making myself a fool!"

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But, it was pointed out, he opened fire immediately on arriving at the Jallianwalla Bagh. General Dyer responded with the tried and trusted defence that he considered his troops and himself to be in danger.

He was asked by Indian lawyer Pandit Narayan what he had meant by the term "salutary effect". The reply was astonishing from the ex-public schoolboy who obviously considered himself to be head prefect for the Punjab: "I wanted to punish the naughty boy. One wouldn't want to punish a boy that isn't naughty, would one?"

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The English in India largely spoke with one voice on the subject. General Dyer was being hailed as "the saviour of the Punjab!" or even "The saviour of India!"

The same day as General Dyer ordered "normality" in the Punjab, he also declared martial law with a series of bizarre punishments attached to it.

All Indians, no matter their rank, had to 'salaam' — bow and scrape — to any passing European. Failure to do so would result in flogging. Water and electricity supplies to the Indian quarter were cut off and a rigid curfew imposed.

Within the Raj itself, there was growing unease about O'Dwyer's style of government. Edwin Morgan, Secretary of State for India, was becoming increasingly critical.

"Many a man in Ireland has tried similar action and many an Irishman will tell you that the sorry condition of that country today is partly due to these efforts."

## War in Ireland

Ireland was two months into the Black and Tan War, initiated by the volunteers at Soloheadbeg in O'Dwyer's native Tipperary, which had also been governed directly by the military since the RIC had been attacked by the IRA. Dail Eireann had met "illegally" in Dublin and troops opening fire on civilians was about to become depressingly normal. It was clear that O'Dwyer the Irishman could see no problem in any of this.

The humiliation of the native population continued. General Dyer was made an "honorary Sikh" at a ceremony in the Golden Temple at Amritsar, the manager of the Golden Temple being a Punjab government appointee. How would we have reacted to Colonel Wilford of the Paras being honoured at a civic

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Meanwhile, the Mother of Parliaments was buzzing with rumours of the massacre and General Dyer's testimony. MPs wanted to know why it had taken the best part of a year for the news to reach them!

O'Dwyer appeared before the Hunter Commission on January 15, 1920, as his native country had risen against the state he served and his own county was under martial law. O'Dwyer sought to justify his and his general's actions: "Amritsar was in a state of open rebellion".

Hunter reported the following month. The report was handed to Lord Chelmsford. There were two reports — a majority report and a minority report which was signed by the Indian members of the team.

## Mildly rebuked

The majority report condemned General Dyer for firing without warning and continuing to fire until his ammunition was spent. Despite this it defended O'Dwyer for "great decisiveness and vigour at a time of great danger". He was only mildly rebuked for not inquiring more fully into General Dyer's actions!

The document could have been dusted off in 1972 and saved Lord Widgery a lot of time. The comparisons with Bloody Sunday in Derry and the follow-up inquiry are incommensurate.

On March 9, the day after the report was handed over to the government, General Dyer was summoned to Delhi where he was relieved of his command. When he boarded a Southampton-bound ship, he did so to the sound of "for he's a jolly good fellow" ringing in his ears.

O'Dwyer, who had since retired from India, was still behind the scenes drumming up influential support for his subordinate. He even involved himself in the launch of a public appeal for funds to defray General Dyer's legal expenses.

The first contributor to this fund was Ulster loyalist Sir Edward Carson. He tabled a Commons motion condemning the way in which General Dyer had been treated. This was only narrowly defeated.

O'Dwyer embarked on a public campaign through the pages of *The Morning Post* calling for a complete vindication of both himself and General Dyer.

In April 1922, he won a libel action against Sir Sankaran Nair, a former member of the Viceroy's executive council, who had published a book, *Gandhi and Anarchy*, which was critical of O'Dwyer.

The latter was awarded damages of £500, with £20,000 costs against Nair. This judgement was widely regarded as a full vindication of both O'Dwyer and his general.

This final insult to the people of the Punjab convinced the final few waverers that the Raj was poisonous and would have to go, that the people of India could create a country without caste or colonialism.

General Dyer died peacefully on July 23, 1927, at his home in Long Ashton outside Bristol, but O'Dwyer's final chapter was yet to be written.

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