

For Father Liam Martin.

Statement by FR. John Pigott  
Army Chaplain 1922-1929

With reference to the Executions in Mountjoy Jail on Dec., 3th 1922 there have been many different and very contradictory accounts of what actually happened. Many reports were spread abroad for their propaganda value without any regard for the truth. It was said that Rory O'Connor died a cowardly death: that Liam Mellowes was refused the Last Sacraments by the Chaplains and that he went to his death without the aids of his religion. That lie has been so persistently repeated by a small anti-Clerical group that it is possible that a number of our people believe it. It was said that the actual shootings were carried out in a brutal manner ect., ect.,

As one who was personally involved in the tragic and deplorable events of that 3th Decenber I shall set down here what I know to be the truth. Even to day I have a clear and vivid recollection of everything that happened - and, indeed, I am never likely to be without it. In one respect only, I cannot claim to be accurate, and that, is with regard to the hour each event took place, but indeed, on that question I could not be sure to be accurate if I were asked on the 9th Decenber''

About 1.30.a.m., or perhaps a bit later on Dec., 3th. an Officer phoned me from Mountjoy Jail and informed me that there were to be executions - that one of the Prisoners had asked for my attendance - that I was to dress, and be ready to be called for. I was collected and driven to Mountjoy arriving probably about 2.a.m. when I was immediately taken to Rory O'Connor's Cell. He was pale but perfectly calm and composed and when I suggested that we waste no time in any discussions, but get down to the actual preparation he said " That is exactly what I want Father " and I can say that no one could have made a more Christian preparation for death than did Rory O'Connor. He spent the few hours that were left to him, in humble and fervent prayer and never at any time right up to the end did I see in him any sign of fear or even nervousness. Just before I took him to Mass where he was to receive Holy Viaticum he said to me, " Do you know Father? Isn't strange, this is the Anniversary of my First Holy Communion;" I thought that the recollection must have given him some extra consolation, now as he was about to receive his Last Holy Communion.

I had been a few hours with Rory O'Connor when I was called out by Canon McMahon who asked me if I would see Liam Mellowes. He said " How have not been getting on at all ! " When I saw Mellowes I found him in a strange mood for one who was to die in a few hours. He was obviously agitated, and talkative, and, I believe, elated that he was to die for Ireland. He said he had written to his Mother and handing me the letter he said " read that " I did so, and saw that he had informed his Mother that he had a disagreement with the Chaplain: that he was not receiving the Sacraments, but, that anyone going out to die for Ireland did not need the Sacraments, I do not remember the exact words, but that was the substance of his message.

I told him that he should not send such a letter to his mother. I begged him to use the very short time that was now left to him speaking out to God and humbly

pleading with Him for the direction and grace he now needed. I knew that God would not fail him, but I was convinced that it was best that he be left alone with God just then. There would be no arguments with God and precious time would not be wasted, and telling him that I would see him again I went back to Rory O'Connor.

Much sooner than I had expected, we were all taken to the Chapel for Mass and I had not seen Mellowes again until he knelt with the three others outside the Altar Rails. During the Mass which Canon McMahon said, I stood inside the Altar rails facing the Prisoners, reciting with them, the prayers and litanies for the dying. Barrett, McKelvey, and O'Connor received Holy Communion ( which was their Viaticum ) at the Mass, but, Mellowes did not. After he had concluded the Mass Canon McMahon joined me at the Altar rails, and continued to offer prayers and litanies for the dying. I have never known any Priest who could have prayed more fervently and more perseveringly than did the Canon during that fateful hour. Time and time again he repeated all the Prayers with the prisoners joining fervently in the responses, I was certain that God's Grace was flowing about abundantly, and that Mellowes would not be denied his requirements.

I don't know how long we were there after Mass, but it must have been a full hour.

At this stage my chief concern was to get Lian Mellowes on his own, but, how to do it was the problem. The Canon still prayed on: Phil Cosgrave the Governor of Mountjoy stood " to attention " at the side of the Altar --- and he had been standing there like a Statue since Mass began --- probably about an hour and a half! Several times I looked at him, but he never moved a muscle. He knew that Mellowes had not received Holy Communion, and he was evidently reluctant to bring the prayers to an end, for he, as well as everybody else present, was well aware of the intention in all the praying.

Finally there was an end to the prayers, and the prisoners were led out of the Chapel in single file, with Mellowes leading, and O'Connor, with whom I walked was at the rear.

As they walked along the passage they were suddenly halted, and Officers immediately proceeded to blind-fold them. This was done in a matter of seconds, and I was afraid my last chance of helping poor Mellowes was gone, I ran up to him, and took the bandage from his eyes and said " Lian Mellowes, you are not going out there without Viaticum " He replied " Ah! its too late now I have held them up all the morning! " I said " No its not too late, they will wait a little longer for you; come with me and make your peace with God! " That he was now ready to do so, I had not the slightest doubt, I took him by the arm ten or fifteen yards back the passage to a cell, the door of which I saw open, and in a few minutes he was shaven. He was a deeply religious man, and his fervent prayers at the end had gained him a very special Grace from God. Canon McMahon went to the Chapel to bring him Viaticum but he did not return in a few minutes, as I had expected he would. He was a long time away and just as I was about to go out to look for him Father John Fennelly arrived at the door and he stayed with Mellowes while I went to the Chapel. As I approached it I heard loud knocking and I called out " Canon McMahon " and he shouted in reply " Im locked into the Sacristy: I cannot open the door! "

Paudeen O'Keefe, the Deputy-Governor who was doing his rounds with his huge bunch of keys saw the Sacristy door open: he closed it and locked it at once not knowing the Canon had gone in " " I found " Paudeen " as quickly as possible and brought him to unlock the door. I have never forgotten his words when I told him what he had done.. " Well Blasht him wht took him in there " ! ! The Canon was released. Lian Mellowes received Viaticum, and in a few minutes we were on our way to re-join the others. He asked me to go and see his mother and tell her all, and taking a little Crucifix from his pocket he said " I want you to give her this when all is over " and looking lovingly at it, he added " It was out in 1916 too " ! He held that little Cricifix firmly in his hand until the end.

As he was being blind-folded again, I suddenly remembered the letter he had written, and I asked him if he would write a few words more now. He said " Ah there's no time now ! I'm sure I could have got him time, and sure no one there would have refused it, but seeing the others, I could not press him. He said his mother would believe me, but I knew she would not.

In a few minutes we wove all in the Prison yard and the four, all brave and calm were lined up before the Firing Squad. I gave a last Absolution and as I was having a final word with Rory and Lian I saw Lian shuffled the gravel from under his feet so that he could stand up more firmly. I moved a few yards to the right, and as I did so, I heard Lian Mellowes say his last words " Slan Lib Lads " --- his farewell to the Firing Party.

In another instant the sign was given: the volley rang out: the men fell, and Canon McMahon and I annointed them where they lay on the ground.

Two Provo-Officers stood by, to put out of pain, anyone not already dead. McKelvey who was conscious needed attention and I heard him call " give me another" \_\_\_ "and another and then there was silence----- a great Silence-----

It was after 9.30 a.m., I was already hours late for Masses in Griffith Barracks and I had to rush away leaving the Canon to attend to the burial.

When I reached the outer gate of the Prison I remembered the little Crucifix. I went back and found it beside the body, and took it away to fulfill my promise.

To contradict to a grief-stricken mother, the last written words of her Son was for me a terrible prospect, but I had promised.

And next day, with a heavy heart, I called to that door in Mount Shannon Road, I felt I could never face the ordeal had I not in my pocket that little Crucifix " That was out in 1916 too " .