

THE MURDER OF

DR MULDOON

A SUSPECT PRIEST

A WIDOW'S FIGHT FOR JUSTICE



A TRUE STORY

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PROLOGUE

The gathering took place on a dark winter's evening on 17 January 1923, at the modest home of the parish priest in the small village of Cloone in County Leitrim. Three members of the local clergy were in attendance: the parish priest, Fr Deniston, a young curate named Edward Dunne, and Fr Edward Ryans, a curate from the neighbouring parish of Aughavas. The local doctor, Paddy Muldoon, and his wife, Rita, had driven the five miles or so from the town of Mohill for the meeting. But this wasn't a social gathering and any pleasantries exchanged soon gave way to the more serious matter at hand – the crisis pregnancy of Fr Ryans' housekeeper, Mary Kate Gallogly.

An hour or so into the meeting, Fr Ryans became highly agitated. Suddenly and without warning he pulled an automatic pistol from his cassock and began waving it around the room in a threatening manner. While everyone there was shocked by a man of the cloth using a lethal weapon to make his feelings known, only one person kept a written account of the events of that night: Rita Muldoon.¹

In her own words: 'Fr. R produced Automatic and informed guests and especially Dr. M and myself that the weapon would account for 12 men, told us also that he carried this with impunity, that he had often escaped search

when others were being held up and searched by Free S. Troops.’²

The priest was clearly angered by the intervention of Paddy and Rita Muldoon into his affairs, but while his behaviour that night was undoubtedly volatile and unhinged, it would only grow worse in the following weeks. His subsequent actions would create a scandal of national proportions, affecting a pregnant young woman, her child, and a peaceful, hard-working doctor and his family.

All of their lives would be changed forever.

CHAPTER 1

On the morning of 18 January 1923, Rita Lee Muldoon set off by train for Dublin.¹ She was making the journey as part of her duties to help look after the business of her husband Paddy's medical dispensary, a practice covering an area around the town of Mohill in south County Leitrim. Her trip started at Dromod station, the point at which the Midland Great Western railway service came closest to Mohill as it made its way from Sligo to Dublin.

The train journey to Dublin would have taken Rita through the towns of Longford and Mullingar, by now well established as centres of control by the nascent Irish Free State. In 1921 the Irish War of Independence had ended with a truce between the British and Irish sides. After difficult negotiations, a treaty was finalised that would bring about peace between Britain and Ireland. However, disagreement over the terms of this treaty within Ireland itself led to the reshaping of the conflict from a reasonably straightforward fight against the British to horrific domestic strife during 1922. The Civil War hampered the establishment of the Irish Free State, but by early 1923 the conflict had for the most part been reduced to acts of sabotage and revenge: roads and railways were targeted, locomotives and bridges demolished. Only weeks before Rita's journey to Dublin, stations in

Ballybunion, Listowel and Sligo were destroyed by the anti-Treaty forces.

As Rita sat looking out at the wintry landscape unfolding across the north midlands, she had time to reflect on the events of the previous evening. It was the first time she had become fully aware of Fr Edward Ryans' inherent violence and menace. Regardless of this, she was determined to pursue the priest in order to ensure that he did the right thing by his housekeeper, who was by now in the later stages of her pregnancy.

Rita's involvement with the local Mohill District Nursing Association, a voluntary group providing child welfare and midwifery services and other medical assistance to the poor, gave her an insight into the plight of young, and sometimes single, pregnant women in the area. When Mary Kate Gallogly's pregnancy came to her attention, probably through the nursing association, Rita became determined to ensure that the young woman be treated with the respect she deserved.² Even if that meant going up against the local priest.

Paddy and Rita Muldoon had been married almost five and a half years by January 1923. They had a young and growing family and were well settled in Mohill, a town familiar to Paddy because it lay about eight miles south of his family home.

Michael Patrick Muldoon, known as Paddy, was born on 3 September 1891, near the village of Fenagh in South Leitrim. The Muldoons were farmers and had lived in the townland of Cloodrumin for over half a century.³ His father, Patrick Muldoon, was already a thirty-five-year-old widower when he married Paddy's mother, Mary Anne Duignan in January 1871 in the Catholic church at nearby Drumcong. Patrick Muldoon Senior had a modest farm but managed through hard work and good fortune to increase the holding to sixty acres when he acquired a plot from his brother, who emigrated to England around 1865.⁴ By 1911 the Muldoon family were comfortable enough to have added a second floor to their house and to employ a young servant girl. The census of that year also reveals a sad reality of the times: Mary Anne Muldoon had given birth to fifteen children, but only nine still lived.

Paddy was the youngest of the family, born in 1891, and he benefited from that position. Three of his older brothers, James, Thomas and Joseph, and a sister, Roseanne, had emigrated to the west coast of America between 1898 and 1910. They regularly sent money home to their parents, remittances which most likely financed the enlarging of the family home and helped provide a good education for Paddy. He attended St Mary's College, the Marist secondary school in Dundalk. From there he went on to study medicine at the National University of Ireland in Dublin.⁵ Paddy attended university during the significant period of the 1916 Rising

and its aftermath, and it was during these tumultuous times that he met and fell in love with Rita Lee.

Margaret, known as Rita, was four years younger than Paddy. Although they both came from relatively prosperous backgrounds in rural Ireland, Rita's family were firmly in the middle class. The Lees, who sometimes went by the grander-sounding surname of Hession-Lee, were a Catholic family that had made significant progress up the social ladder. Rita's father, Bernard Lee, was originally from Roundstone in County Galway but had moved to nearby Clifden, attracted by the better opportunities there. He married Margaret Hession and they had a family of four girls and four boys. Bernard was a successful merchant and publican who ran his business from the premises in Market Street that is now occupied by Vaughan's pub and bistro. His daughters went to good schools and Rita's older sisters, May and Delia, had the privilege of attending finishing schools in France. Rita and her younger sister, Imelda, were sent to the Dominican nuns in Eccles Street, Dublin. Two of her brothers, Michael and Alfred, qualified as doctors, while Bernard Ambrose, or Amby as he was known, became a solicitor.⁶

Unusually for women in Ireland at that time, Rita Lee had continued her education to university level, studying medicine in Dublin. A strikingly attractive woman, she was not particularly tall, but had a heart-shaped face and high cheekbones. In photographs from the early 1920s she has a strong, direct gaze. The family was undoubtedly proud of

Rita's academic achievements, which is why it must have dismayed them when she decided, quite suddenly, to abandon her medical studies to get married.⁷

On 14 August 1917, just two days before his registration as a doctor, Paddy Muldoon married Margaret Lee at the Catholic church in Clifden, County Galway. She was just twenty-one years old; he was twenty-five. Rita was already expecting their first child when they married.

The recently qualified doctor and his new wife left Ireland almost immediately, a decision likely influenced by a desire to put some distance between themselves and their families, who were not happy about the circumstances of the marriage. Paddy and Rita moved to Wales so that Paddy could take up a position assisting a general practitioner, Dr Howell Evans, who described his practice as 'a large panel and colliery practice in Monmouthshire where exceptional opportunities daily occur of gaining experience in Surgery, Midwifery, and General Practice'.⁸ Paddy and Rita's first child, Patrick Bernard Llewellyn, known as Llew, was



Paddy and Rita Muldoon with their two oldest children, Llew and Olwyn, in 1920. (© The Muldoon/Donnelly family.)

born in Monmouthshire on 30 January 1918, just five-and-a-half months after they were married.⁹

Despite the reasons for their move to Wales, it appears that shortly after the birth of Llew the Muldoons desired to return to their home country. Neither, it seemed, wanted to raise a child in exile. They had been in Wales for just six months when the young doctor applied to move back to Ireland, to his home county of Leitrim, where a large public medical practice, known as the Rynn Dispensary District of Mohill, about eight miles from where Paddy had grown up, had become vacant in March 1918.

His application met with some resistance, however. The Local Government Board in Dublin didn't want the vacancy filled at the time, particularly by a young doctor whose expertise could be utilised on the Western Front. The board's main priority was providing doctors for the Royal Army Medical Corps, as Britain remained engaged in the Great War. This meant that there was effectively a ban on recruitment. However, the Mohill Board of Guardians, reflecting the growing nationalist and anti-conscription fervour at the time, disregarded the Local Government Board's request that the position not be filled and set about appointing Paddy Muldoon. This resulted in the Local Government Board relenting and agreeing to confirm his position, initially on a temporary basis.¹⁰

Rita and Paddy Muldoon arrived back in Ireland with their young child at a time when the world was facing one of

the greatest medical challenges of the twentieth century: the Spanish flu pandemic.¹¹ The flu was sweeping through the community of South Leitrim just as Paddy was taking over the practice. The run-up to the general election of December 1918, which saw Sinn Féin emerge as the dominant political force in Ireland, helped spread the outbreak of the flu, with its mass meetings and countrywide movement of party activists. In such an unprecedented medical emergency, the Rynn Dispensary area, sixteen miles long and six miles broad, was lucky to have the services of a young, energetic doctor.¹²

A local newspaper reported on the challenges facing the young Muldoon: ‘He was on his feet night and day attending his patients. No distance or circumstances hindered him in the discharge of his onerous duties and his name was popular in every household in South Leitrim’.¹³ By the time the Spanish flu pandemic had worked its way through the world’s population, which included more than 20,000 victims in Ireland, Paddy Muldoon had earned the respect of the people he served.

As a result, by 1923 he and Rita were firmly established and respected in South Leitrim. Now thirty-one, Paddy had become used to long hours and a challenging workload. In spite of these, photographs of him at the time show a round, amiable face, which gave him the appearance of a much younger man. Known for his fine physique and good horse-riding skills, he was obliging in his work and personal life, and clearly loved his role as a country doctor. He was a

regular sight rushing to patients spread across a wide area in his Model T Ford touring car, a rare enough sight on the back roads of the county at the time. On occasions, he cut a particular dash, travelling on his motorbike, a Douglas 250cc tourer, capable of forty-five miles an hour on the winding country roads.

Rita was just as busy as her husband. As well as looking after the three young children they had at this stage – Llew, Olwyn and Des – and running a busy household, Rita managed the accounts of the medical practice. Her journey to Dublin on 18 January was for the purpose of meeting the Paymaster General of the Free State army in relation to payments for her husband's services to troops. In addition to his main occupation as a dispensary doctor, Paddy Muldoon also had a role as a medical officer to the National Army.¹⁴

The Muldoons had, by then, been involved in providing medical care in South Leitrim during four years of conflict, starting with the War of Independence and continuing into the Civil War that followed. Paddy provided medical care to both sides in the Civil War without fear or favour and would often have someone from the government side coming in the front door of the house to attend his surgery at the same time as an anti-Treaty supporter was leaving by the back. Still, Rita had taken the precaution of sewing a large red cross on Paddy's overcoat, so that when he was out on calls in the countryside he wouldn't be mistaken for a combatant by either side.¹⁵

However, it wasn't the general conflict that was on Rita's mind that January day, but the potential for more trouble from the priest who had produced a weapon the previous night. She would later come to learn that the entire town of Mohill, it seemed, was aware of the out-of-control behaviour of this priest, and his later activities would come as no surprise to many locals. It was common knowledge, after all, that Ryans was deeply involved with anti-Treaty forces in the area, a group who were causing no end of trouble.

Her railway journey to Dublin ended safely at the Broadstone depot, less than a mile north of the city centre. As she left the station, Rita, who was pregnant again, could not have known how significant this railway terminus would become in the weeks ahead, with a pivotal and bizarre event in the Muldoons' and Ryans' story playing out in its vicinity.

On a clear night in March 1923, as Dr Paddy Muldoon makes his way home in Mohill, Co. Leitrim, a man steps from the shadows, raises a rifle to his shoulder and fires. The first shot misses its target, but when two more are fired, Dr Muldoon is left dying on the road.

In the days following the murder the doctor's grieving but determined wife, Rita, vows to bring the man she believes responsible to justice - a volatile priest by the name of Fr Edward Ryans. He is a man of the cloth with dark secrets and his own ugly reasons for wanting the doctor silenced. But in their fight for justice, Rita and her family come to see that there are powerful forces at the highest levels of the government, Church and republican forces who desperately want the case to remain unsolved.



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