

The tragedy at Béal na Bláth

Sir —

Mary O'Rourke, in her column last week, recalled in her ever-pleasant style Brian Lenihan addressing the annual commemoration at Béal na Bláth 10 years ago. But in it she continually repeats that Michael Collins was "assassinated". This is just not true.

"Assassination" is the pre-meditated killing of someone in particular. But virtually no one — apart from film-maker Neil Jordan — claims that the IRA group which attacked the Free State military convoy entering their region during the Civil War, had any idea Collins was in the armoured car their bullets ricocheted off so harmlessly.

Collins should have stayed inside the car and driven on. However, there appears to have been drink taken, and Collins recklessly insisted on getting out and engaging the attackers, who were positioned high up on the adjacent hillside. Why, we don't know, for his aides pleaded with him not to.

Maybe — and this is purely conjecture — it was because he had not actually personally ever been in a gun battle, at least not since he served as Joseph Plunkett's aide in the GPO at Easter 1916.

At Béal na Bláth, Collins sadly went down with all guns blazing — what in military jargon is called "killed in action" — in a battle in which he needlessly insisted on participating. There was no "assassination".

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Collins killed in action, not assassinated

Letter, *History Ireland*, September-October 2020:

Sir, - I read with interest Alison Martin's article on Michael Collins and the British press (*HI* 28.4, July/August 2020). It is, however, a pity that her opening sentence contains a historical inaccuracy, which is repeated in the penultimate paragraph, where the August 1922 death of Collins is termed an "assassination". There were indeed assassinations during the Treaty War. In December 1922, the pro-Treaty TD Sean Hales was assassinated while on his way to Dáil Éireann, following which, in reprisal, Liam Mellows and three other anti-Treaty prisoners were murdered in Mountjoy Gaol.

But Collins was neither "assassinated" nor "murdered". Ignoring the advice to drive on to safety, Collins chose to stop the car, step out, and exchange fire with the Republican ambush party. Collins was no more assassinated than had been his anti-Treaty opponent Cathal Brugha in July 1922, nor, indeed, The O'Rahilly in Easter Week 1916. To employ the term "assassination", in such circumstances of two-way exchanges in warfare, is not only historically inaccurate, it does a disservice to the memory of Collins who, if incredibly reckless, was undoubtedly brave. We can say of all three - The O'Rahilly, Brugha and Collins - that they were killed in action, having chosen to engage in combat, each with gun in hand.

- Yours etc.,
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