

# Liam Pilkington

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**Liam Pilkington** (2 June 1894 – 26 March 1977), also known as **William Pilkington** and **Billy Pilkington**, served in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) during the Irish War of Independence. Pilkington served the IRA as General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the 3rd Western Division IRA from 1921 to 1923. After the conclusion of the Irish War of Independence Pilkington joined the Anti-Treaty IRA<sup>[1]</sup> during the Irish Civil War. He attempted to become a politician for a short while, but was ultimately unsuccessful. Disillusioned due to the Irish Civil War, Pilkington became a Catholic priest for the remainder of his life. He served as a priest in South Africa and Wales before retiring to Liverpool, England, where he died.

## Early life

Pilkington was born in Sligo on 2 June 1894. He received his education at the local Marist Brothers' convent school and the Day Trades Preparatory School. Later he was a student at the Department of Agriculture Forestry College in County Wicklow. When the Irish War of Independence began, the College was closed and Pilkington was forced to return to Sligo. He then gained employment with Wehrly Brothers Ltd. (a jewellery and watchmaking store) in Sligo.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Military career

Several notable incidents occurred in Pilkington's military career. On 25 October 1920 at Moneygold, eight miles from Sligo (between Grange and Cliffony in County Sligo), the IRA ambushed a nine-man Royal Irish Constabulary patrol, killing four (Sergeant Patrick Perry, Constable Patrick Keown, Constable Patrick Laffey, Constable Patrick Lynch) and wounding two others (Constables Clarke and O'Rourke). The IRA ambush was led by Sligo Brigade Commanding Officer (O/C) William Pilkington.<sup>[3][4]</sup> On 4 September 1922, an Anti-Treaty IRA unit under Liam Pilkington took the Dromhaire barracks in County Sligo because the Free State garrison surrendered. On 6 April 1922, a meeting to be addressed by Arthur Griffith in Sligo was proclaimed by local Anti-Treaty IRA divisional commander, Liam Pilkington. Pilkington's troops took over a number of buildings in the town. Sean MacEoin brought Provisional Government troops from Athlone and on the day of the meeting, he was joined by further troops led by JJ "Ginger" O'Connell. A tense situation ensued but, at the last minute, Pilkington backed down and the meeting went ahead.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Political career

On 27 August 1923, Pilkington ran unsuccessfully in the general election for the 4th Dáil as a Republican candidate, polling 2089 first preference votes.

## Anti-Treaty IRA

Pilkington was a prominent member of the Anti-Treaty IRA for many years, but his most important role as part of the Anti-Treaty IRA came on 20 April 1923. The Executive of Anti-Treaty IRA met in Poulacappal (four miles southwest of Callan and three miles from Mullinahone). Present were Frank Aiken, Liam Pilkington (replacing Liam Lynch), Sean Hyde, Sean Dowling, Bill Quirke, Tom Barry, Tom Ruane (replacing Michael Kilroy), Tom Sullivan (replacing Sean Lehane), Sean McSwiney, Tom Crofts, P. J. Rutledge and Sean O'Meara (substitute for Seamus Robinson). Frank Aiken was elected Chief-of-Staff and an Army Council of Aiken, Pilkington and Barry was appointed, although Macardle says that Sean Hyde was also included. Aiken proposed that peace should be made with the Pro-Treaty Government on the basis that "The sovereignty of the Irish Nation and the integrity of its territory is inalienable". This was passed by nine votes to two.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Catholic priest

Pilkington became a Catholic priest after his foray into politics and due to the disillusionment of the Irish War of Independence. He joined the Redemptorist Order and became known as Father William Pilkington CSsR. Pilkington served as a priest in the Diocese of Cape Town, South Africa, priest of Monmouthshire, Wales,<sup>[7]</sup> and retired to the Redemptorist house at Bishop Eton, Liverpool, where he died in 1977.

## Later life, death and legacy

In 1954 he was guest of honour at a dinner sponsored by Clan na Gael and the IRA Veterans of America in New York where he said he was returning to the mission fields of Africa, but he remained faithful to the All Ireland Republic.<sup>[8]</sup> He died on 26 March 1977 and was buried in Liverpool.

Vernon Street in Sligo was renamed Pilkington Terrace in his memory.

## References

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *Sammon, Willie. "The War of Independence and Civil War in Newport". Back the Road: Volume 2. Newport Historical Society. Retrieved 10 February 2011.*

2. Farry (1992), p. 59.
3. *Hopkinson, Michael (2004). The Irish War of Independence. Dublin: McGill-Queen's University Press. p. 136. ISBN 0-7735-2840-7.*
4. *Abbott, Richard (2000). Police Casualties in Ireland 1919–1922. Cork: Mercier Press. pp. 138–139. ISBN 1-85635-314-1.*
5. Hopkinson (1988), p. 76.
6. Hopkinson (1988), p. 256.
7. *"50 Years Ago". Saoirse Irish Freedom. June 1997. Retrieved 10 February 2011.*
8. The United Irishman November/December 1954

#### Sources



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