

Elizabeth Pearson, Liveline, 6 November 2007

Joe Duffy:

An enormous reaction to the argument on the programme yesterday about the killings of these two young men, the Pearson brothers Richard and Abraham in 1921 in Offaly and the reasons for it. And the people of Cadamstown, Paddy Heaney from Cadamstown, said that a recent RTÉ programme had maligned the people of Offaly. And then we were contacted by Roger Pearson. We were told that all the family had gone to Australia, but one of them had come back. Roger is now living and working in Dublin, we heard him yesterday, with a fine Australian accent – he considers himself to be Australian. But Elizabeth Pearson is on the line. Elizabeth, good afternoon.

Elizabeth Pearson:

Hello, Joe.

JD

And you are a relation of the Pearsons?

EP

Yes, the family were cousins. I don't know how close cousins they were to my father. We were always aware of it. As a child you'd hear them talking about it. But it was always – they were afraid to talk. You'd hear whispers, you'd ask them what they were talking about, and they'd just, you know, "Shh ..." [Laughs]. So I always was aware of it, but I'd forgotten about it until the book by Alan Stanley – "I met murder on the way" – came out.

JD

Alan Stanley is the son of one of the men who happened to be with the two Pearson boys when they were shot by the IRA.

EP

Yes, that's right.

JD

Now you know the thesis that was put forward yesterday by Paddy Heaney and a number of other people, that the two Pearson young men were shot dead, because, after a court martial by the IRA, it was alleged that they were collaborating with the British, and they had fired on a raiding party who were trying to block a road. What is the Pearson family's analysis of what happened?

EP

I think it's very unlikely that they had shot at them, because the Cooneyites – nobody seems to be speaking up for them – the Cooneyites are very respectable people ...

JD

Just remind people. The Cooneyites are a group ...

EP

They're a group...

JD

They follow the Protestant religion?

EP

Well, yes, they're not affiliated to any Church. They actually started out from the Faith Mission, and they sent this man Cooney. He went to Tipperary to recruit new members, and he broke away from them and formed his own group, and they became known as Cooneyites.

JD

Cooneyites – and what were their beliefs?

EP

Well, they believed that they were the only ones that were going to get to Heaven – that they were the proper religion – as a lot of other religions do. In a way they're very like the Quakers – though they probably wouldn't agree [laughs]. The women have to wear their hair up in a bun, and they have to dress modestly and all these things. They don't get involved in politics whatsoever. They don't even vote. And they don't drink, they don't smoke.

JD

Are there Cooneyites still in Ireland?

EP

Oh yes, there are, especially around Tipperary, and Dublin. And I wish some of them would contact you too.

JD

This is very germane to it because one of the arguments put forward was that the Pearsons had shot ... and the point made yesterday, I think by one of the family members, was that the Cooneyites were pacifists.

EP

They absolutely were. They were totally against violence. They didn't own guns. As far as I know, certainly at the moment, ...

JD

Why do you think these two boys ...?

EP

I think it was about land. I think there was a lot of resentment about. And I also think it was very odd that they were shot in the genital organs. Because if they were executed they would have been shot in the head, Joe, or the chest, or something like that. And I have a theory myself that maybe they were involved with some local girls or something, and it just seems an odd way of shooting someone, unless there was something like that going on, you know.

JD

They were shot in the groin.

EP

They were shot in the groin.

JD

And we had a number of calls yesterday from members of the Protestant faith who also had family members killed in the war of independence, and they were adamant that they were killed just because they were Protestant!

EP

Yes, yes, and then again you have to understand how things were at the time of war maybe ... you have to try to see it from both sides. But I do feel myself that it was very unlikely that they [Pearsons] had shot at them [IRA]. They just don't. They are pacifists, absolutely. And they still are.

JD

But also Niall Meehan who has researched this has pointed out that there was a meeting in the Mansion House, I think in the middle of 1922, comprised of Protestants, who said that they didn't feel – the phrase used yesterday, not by Niall – that there was ethnic cleansing, that they didn't feel they were under threat.

EP

Hmm ... I don't know that we felt under threat in the past. I'm of the Protestant faith myself – I'm not a Cooneyite. I think everybody was afraid at that time. It wasn't just Protestants that were shot and killed. A lot of people used the fight to score with people, and to get rid of ... It wasn't all, you know... there were Roman Catholics killed as well, over land, and a lot of houses were burned down.

JD

And as a member of the Pearson family, do you still – because Roger Pearson told us yesterday, it was after the programme his workmates in Dublin – they thought he was Australian – which he is of course, but they didn't know he had an Irish background as such – they said to him, are you related to that Pearson, and he said yeah, and I'm one the grandchildren, and he said there was some gentle ribbing and that was it, but then there were some other people on the programme and they said you don't talk about it ...

EP

You don't – absolutely not ...

JD

Why not?

EP

While I was a child – I'm getting on now – definitely at that time they were too frightened to say anything.

JD

Frightened of whom, Elizabeth?

EP

I don't know. I suppose that there were people around and that – you know – we had a large farm as well that, you know, remained ...we were Protestants and ... It just wasn't, and, as I say, that was on both sides. It wasn't just Protestants that suffered. But I do think they were murdered, and I don't believe it was an execution.

JD

You think it was simply to get the land, or ...?

EP

Well, that's my feeling ...

JD

... or was it ethnic cleansing?

EP

I think it was probably over the land. I don't think it was because they were Protestant. I think they resented the fact that they had the land. But then they were very hard workers ...

JD

Apparently so, very diligent farmers ...

EP

... and they devoted themselves ...

JD

I was surprised, I must say, by the level of passion on yesterday's programme, and I know Senator Eoghan Harris was on the programme, and he made a number of ... allegations, I suppose, about a number of people, and I was led at the time ... we're not condoning these allegations, and Dr Pat Muldowney was one of the people mentioned, he's contacted us, and he wants us to say that "Senator Harris called me a liar and likened me to a Holocaust denier when I read out the British documentary evidence censored by", he says, hidden Ireland, or Hidden History, confirming that the Pearsons were executed for attacking and wounding Irish forces, and evidence that refuted Eoghan Harris's atrocity allegations that the Pearsons were shot in the genitals while the women were forced to watch. Pat Muldowney – dr Pat Muldowney – pointed out that "I am neither a liar nor a Holocaust denier." That's fairly straightforward, I'm happy to read that out, to clarify that.

But you say there was still fear about talking about this?

EP

Oh absolutely.

JD

Yes, thank you. Have you met Roger Pearson?

EP

I haven't, no.

JD

Well, he's back in Dublin, working in the centre of Dublin, you heard him ...

EP

I heard him yesterday, I barely got the end of it, about quarter past two...

JD

I don't know if he'd be your first, second or third cousin ...

EP

I really can't say how close they were, I'll have to go back and look at that.

JD

OK. He has a very very strong Australian accent, but he's a very very lovely man as well. Elizabeth, I appreciate your contacting the programme.

EP

OK, thanks very much.