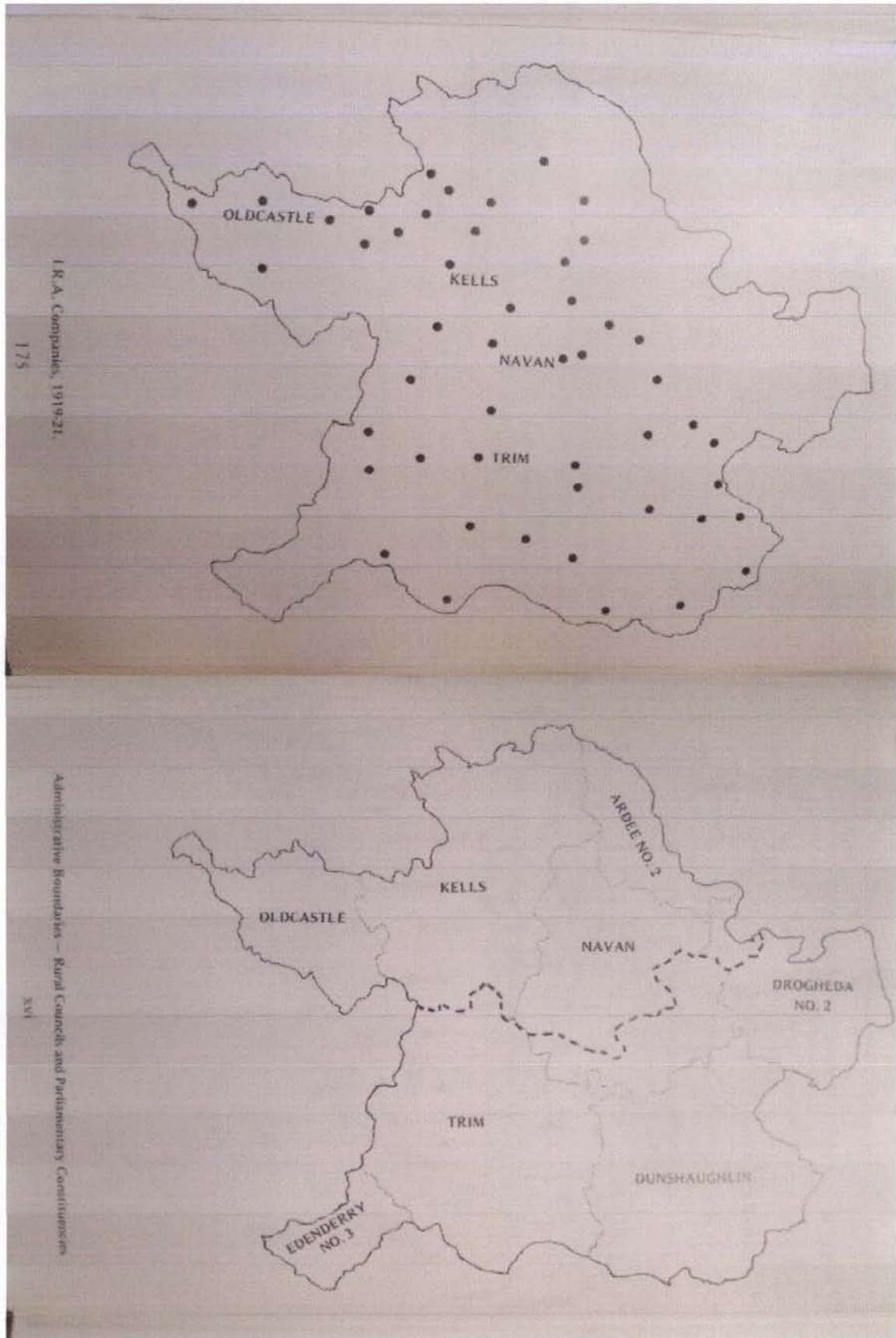


Jesse Tumblin

**“Even the Wind that Blows from England is Foul”
Radicalization and Irish Identity in County Meath, 1914-1918**

By Jesse Tumblin

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When Ireland threw off the yoke of British imperialism in the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, it began the culmination of a centuries-old struggle for independence that was fraught with failure and disappointment. Often romanticized, Ireland's War of Independence with Britain culminated in a messy quotient of self-determination that saw the island partitioned into loyal and separatist regions – this even after a bitter civil war ran its course in the south. But the new, unionist province of Northern Ireland with its Protestant mandate and the nascent Irish Free State in the south that would ultimately become the Republic of Ireland were far from deterministic products of an ancient revolutionary saga. Their bloody birth was only possible with a revolution of ideas and identity, where violence and popular mobilization coincided with an erosion of 'Britishness' that made their aims possible. In this essay I will probe the flashpoints of Ireland's escalating revolutionary tension, highlighting events that catalyzed the crafting of an Irish identity that saw people sympathize with, support, or join the paramilitary units that would prosecute Ireland's War of Independence.

The setting chosen for this examination is County Meath, which lies on the northwest border of Dublin in the province of Leinster (see maps). Meath's revolutionary story lacks the frenetic pace and grand strategy of the violence in Dublin, and is a far cry from the bold and passionate resistance mounted in County Cork – yet it was far from quiet. The county is close enough to the capital to have enjoyed the attention of some of the republican movement's leading figures and collaboration with guerilla units from surrounding areas. Meath has been a hotbed of Irish culture and civilization literally for millennia: some of the nation's historical treasures – the Neolithic monument of Newgrange, the ancient royal site at the Hill of Tara, and the beautiful religious and artistic icon the Book of Kells – all decorate the county's heritage. Yet its chapter in Ireland's revolutionary story is neither tidy nor homogenous. The "action" of

the Irish War of Independence took place in both towns and on lonely rural roadsides. The young men from Meath who joined the Irish Volunteers and Irish Republican Army were variously motivated by fear, politics, ideology and economics. Social support for their actions was varied and involved the opinions of bitter peasants, town shopkeepers, and landed gentry alike. Atop this framework came destabilizing events like the Easter Rising of 1916 and the conscription crisis of 1918, whose impact catapulted Ireland's revolutionary process into motion.

The success of Meathmen and their compatriots where their forebears failed was due to myriad conditions: better organization, popular support, electoral disposition, British preoccupation elsewhere, and others. This study will focus on the process of radicalization that helped bring these conditions about. The primary source material selected comes from the revolutionary conflict's participants: Irish Republican Army guerilla fighters and Royal Irish Constabulary policemen and agents of British government control in County Meath. Security forces' recollections are taken from their official reports of incidents in the period between 1916 and the 1921 Truce, found in the Irish Home Office records in the National Archives of the United Kingdom. IRA paramilitary accounts come from their witness statements; in the early 1950s, the Irish government decided to record the oral history of the surviving participants of the War of Independence. They created the Bureau of Military History to interview the veterans, whose recollections were sealed for fifty years. Declassified in 2003, they give historians unprecedented access to the individual experiences of the war's participants and are only now making their mark on the historiographical landscape.

The witness statements of republicans for the Bureau of Military History are often biased toward the upper echelons of the paramilitary hierarchy, but those given by Meathmen are a helpful distribution of different levels of the Volunteer structure: from Luke Bradley, a rank-and-

file Volunteer from Fordstown Company to Seán Boylan, Commandant of IRA forces for the entire county. Similarly, the guerillas' testimony must be seen through the lens of thirty years' hindsight. Their interviews by the government they helped bring into being are in a way a celebration of the success of their actions, and sensitivity to retrospective triumphalism is important. They cannot be taken for completely objective testimony despite their interviewers' orders to scrutinize as much as possible.

Though my analysis of County Meath and its revolutionary conflict focuses heavily on the escalation of their local political participation and ultimately violent activity, it would be wrong to neglect the process' ideological underpinnings. Ireland's "revolutionary tradition," or more generally its history of resistance to English hegemony, is much-loved in the nationalist historical narrative. It can be traced back as far as one chooses to see it, even to the moment Cambro-Normans first went to Ireland in the twelfth century. Much later, events such as the 1641 rebellion, the 1798 rebellion, the 1848 rising, and the late nineteenth century Fenian turmoil gave Irish republicans a sequence of events they could use to show a trend of continued resistance to British rule, while the horrors of the Great Famine seemed to confirm Britain's callousness.

By the early twentieth century, certain places and families could cite this sequence as a credential in the republican movement, and while Meath lacked the local prestige of County Wexford or Cork, family ideology makes an appearance in the Meathmen's autobiographical discussions. Of the fifteen statements given by nine Meathmen, two mention the republican background of their families: Commandant Seán Boylan and his Adjutant or lieutenant, Seán Farrelly. Said Boylan:

My ancestors took a prominent part in the '98 Rebellion and also in the Fenian Rising. Some of them were transported to Van Diemen's Land [Tasmania, then a penal colony]. My parents told

me this and infused a patriotic spirit into me from the earliest days. My father often and often said to me that nothing good ever came from England. “Even the wind” he would say “that blows from there is a foul one.” He meant of course the east wind. My uncle took a particular pride in asserting that during his whole life, which was a long one, that he never spoke to a policeman.

This was the atmosphere in which I was reared.¹

His lieutenant Seán Farrelly notes, “My father was an active Fenian,”² and provides an interesting anecdote about how his younger brother’s baptism was delayed by a priest who refused to baptize the children of supporters of Charles Stewart Parnell, the late nineteenth century parliamentarian who worked for Irish home rule and who was nicknamed the ‘uncrowned king of Ireland.’³

It is notable that only the two highest-ranking officers who gave statements mention their family background. Statement-givers were asked certain questions by their interviewers, and while I do not have access to these questions, it is possible to discern the patterns in each transcript that indicate them. For example, most of the Meathmen mention whether or not their schooling was nationalistic in character, stating variously whether it was National School (state and church funded), Christian Brothers (Catholic, usually emphasizing religious nationalism), and so forth. David Hall, for instance, notes that his education was not distinctly Irish, which suggests he was asked about it; else why would he bother to say what his education was *not*.⁴ Therefore, availing myself of textual criticism techniques, I hypothesize that Boylan and Farrelly mentioned their republican background when their subordinates did not either because their rank authority gave them more freedom for autobiographical narrative in their interviews, or because

¹ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 212. NAI p.1

² Seán Farrelly. BMH.WS 1648. NAI. p.1

³ *Ibid.* p.2

⁴ David Hall. BMH.WS 1539. NAI. p.1

their questioners had preconceived notions about their status in the republican movement and accordingly inquired as to their republican pedigree.

The county itself had its own place in Ireland's republican narrative, especially in the area of electoral politics. Oliver Coogan, who examines Meath's experience in the War of Independence in his book *Politics and War in Meath, 1913-23*, notes that the county helped launch the careers of three prominent republicans when it gave electoral victories to Daniel O'Connell in 1841, Charles Stewart Parnell in 1875, and Michael Davitt in 1882.⁵ These events linked Meath to the growing nationalist movement of the late nineteenth century, and foreshadowed its role in enacting major political change in 1918.

Buildup to the Irish War of Independence began with the parliamentary campaign for Irish Home Rule, spearheaded by John Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) or Nationalist Party. Holding the balance of power in Parliament in alliance with the Liberal party, the IPP repeatedly forced the tabling of Home Rule bills. These bills were consistently foiled by vetoes in the House of Lords, but pressure on the Liberal government remained high and on 18 September 1914 the Lords capitulated and signed the bill, with the caveat that it would be suspended until the conclusion of the "emergency" that was the outbreak of World War I. Reactionary forces opposed to Home Rule in Ireland had already taken action in January 1913, forming the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), which soon grew by the thousands and had little difficulty acquiring arms for its members. Based primarily in Ulster, Ireland's northeast province, the UVF and its leader Sir Edward Carson were committed to opposing the imposition of Home Rule, and their weapons put formidable force behind their commitment.

In response, those who supported Home Rule organized the Irish Volunteers under the control of John Redmond's IPP in November 1913. At its earliest incarnation the Irish

⁵ Coogan. *Politics and War in Meath, 1913-23*. p. 7

Volunteers enjoyed broad-based support in nationalist Ireland – Coogan remarks that the early meetings of the early 1914 Meath unit were attended by local clergy, local politicians, and gentry – the Earl of Fingal was made the Volunteers’ Inspector-General for the county.⁶ This demonstrates that social support for the nationalist members was, at this juncture, broadly inclusive on the economic level, as opposed to later stages of the conflict that saw the wealthy shirk from campaigns of violence in fear of losing their property.

Seán Boylan reports that he and several of his associates were not interested in joining the Irish Volunteers when it was first organized in Meath, thinking their objectives fell short of the separatist republic sought by more radical Irish nationalists. They formed their own unaffiliated unit, which Boylan says had over a dozen members.⁷ Boylan’s actions highlight the divisions within Irish nationalism even at this early stage. While moderate nationalists aimed for a constitutional solution à la Redmond’s Home Rule bill, more radical republicans sought a completely separatist arrangement regardless of constitutional framework. The divisions also foreshadow the Volunteers’ impending schism and later transition into the guerilla organization that would carry out a campaign of violence against the British establishment.

The outbreak of World War I made some headway in diffusing the perilous scenario of an Ireland under the control of rival paramilitary organizations. Both the UVF and the Irish Volunteers hoped that by supporting Britain’s war effort on the Continent they would gain political clout for their respective causes at home. For the UVF the decision to fight in the war was a natural extension of their British identity and connection to British strategic issues, but Redmond’s decision that the nationalist Volunteers would also join the war effort was divisive and controversial. It drove a wedge between moderate nationalists and hardcore republicans,

⁶ Coogan. *Politics and War in Meath, 1913-23*. p. 3

⁷ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 212. NAI p.1

rending the Volunteers in two; a majority joined Redmond as the National Volunteers, while a more radical anti-British minority remained in Ireland as the Irish Volunteers and later became the Irish Republican Army. Importantly, it effectively shipped the moderate portion of Ireland's armed and politically mobilized population to the European Continent, leaving behind a remnant of radical militants who chose not to fight in "Britain's war." Though the split left the republican Volunteers organizationally crippled – Seán Keogh of Kells remarked that the company in his area ceased to operate for six months following the split – they regrouped with an ideologically committed membership.⁸

Through his contacts in the Gaelic Athletic Association, Seán Boylan connected his unit with other extreme republicans in Dublin such as Patrick Pearse, the figurehead of the Irish Volunteers and leader of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). The IRB was a clandestine organization that had existed since 1858, a time when popular republicanism was growing and guerillas who called themselves Fenians, an Irish word for 'warrior,' committed acts of subversion against British control. The IRB worked behind the scenes of the Fenian movement and drove it toward the goal of an independent Irish republic – a goal that all its members were sworn to uphold. Boylan joined the IRB around this time and began a "circle" in Meath, an important networking tool that would connect republican operations in Meath with the national scene. Their operational strength at eighteen, Boylan's unit raided the headquarters of the National Volunteers in Dunboyne in southeast Meath shortly after the Volunteer split, and took five of their rifles.⁹

⁸ Seán Keogh. BMH.WS 1615. NAI. p.1

⁹ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 212. NAI p.2

The Supreme Council of the IRB resolved soon after the outbreak of World War I that it would attempt a military uprising in Ireland before the war ended.¹⁰ Capitalizing on Britain's distraction with World War I, they also hoped to secure guns from Germany. Preparations for an uprising were made in early 1916 and ultimately the leaders of the Irish Volunteers decided to stage a trial mobilization on St. Patrick's Day that Spring and for the rising to take place on Easter Sunday. The Meath County Inspector, an agent of Ireland's British power structure, noted the Volunteers' St. Patrick's Day mobilization and parade in his report for March 1916.¹¹ This trial mobilization turned out to be a stroke of strategic genius, as then-Inspector General Neville Chamberlain wrote in his report on the 1916 rising: "Easter parades had been ordered all over the country, but there was not more reason on this account to apprehend an immediate rebellion than there was on the 17th March – St. Patrick's Day – when similar mobilizations were carried out."¹² Boylan was contacted by the Dublin leadership about three weeks before Easter and given his orders for the operation. He was to keep lines of communication and transportation from Dublin open. Boylan was disappointed not to lead his men into the thick of battle in the capital, but Pearse sternly informed him that Meath's strategic position just outside Dublin was too important to vacate.¹³

Meanwhile, a representative from the British War Office named Major Bertie Kenny was sent to Ireland to confer with prominent loyalists about how best to suppress the threat of republican insurgents. Consisting of local wealthy landowners from Dublin's environs, this conference took place in Dunboyne Castle in Meath, and Boylan had an inside man named John Moore in the serving staff that evening. Moore reported the general consensus at the meeting:

¹⁰ Charles Townshend. *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publication, 2006). p.122

¹¹ CO 904/99. National Archives of the United Kingdom, March 1916.

¹² CO 904/99. NAUK, June 1916.

¹³ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 212. NAI p.4

the leadership of the Irish Volunteers ought to be interned under the Defense of the Realm Act if Ireland's rebellious murmurings were to be squelched. Boylan was able to relay this information to the Dublin leadership the week before the planned Easter rising, reinforcing the urgency of action.¹⁴ Eugene Bratton, a Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) officer in Meath, states in his recollection of the 1916 rising that he could not recall any order for a planned internment scheme, raising some question as to the substance of the resolution reached at Dunboyne Castle.¹⁵ Reporting what he did not hear suggests that his interviewer questioned him directly about the matter. Nevertheless, as is often the case in scenes of war and intrigue, the threat of internment was provocative because the republicans perceived it as real, whether it was substantiated or not. Having received their final orders on Good Friday, the Meath Volunteers made ready for their mobilization on Easter Sunday. Boylan intended to seize the local train station, but before he could act his IRB contact, a man named Benson, arrived to inform him that the rising had been called off.¹⁶

In reality the Meathmen had fallen victim to a famous communication snafu among the republican leadership on the day of the rising. Eoin MacNeill, Chief-of-Staff of the Irish Volunteers, had hitherto been fiercely opposed to a rising, believing that it was an exercise in futility without significant military aid from Germany. Unfortunately, that possibility was quashed on Good Friday when Sir Roger Casement, a republican who had been in Germany lobbying for intervention in Ireland, was arrested by British authorities after being deposited on the Kerry shore by a German U-boat. His shocking and high-profile arrest was the death knell for potential German intervention in Ireland. It whipped the British into a frenzy of suspicion that culminated in Casement's execution within weeks of his arrest.

¹⁴ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 212. NAI p.3

¹⁵ Eugene Bratton. BMH WS 467. NAI. p.2

¹⁶ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 212. NAI p.4

Nevertheless, the IRB and Patrick Pearse its leader were determined that the rising would go off as planned, even if they had to circumvent the skeptical Eoin MacNeill's authority as Chief-of-Staff to do so. Pearse and his IRB cronies in the Volunteer leadership gave the mobilization order unbeknownst to MacNeill, and when he discovered it he immediately issued an order countermanding it. Pearse and the IRB were able to suppress MacNeill's obstruction in their home turf of Dublin, but the IRB's communication network; such an effective tool in coordinating the republican program, worked all too well in passing along MacNeill's countermand to the rest of Ireland before Pearse and the Dublin IRB could quash it.

The result was a rising that was confined mostly to the streets of Dublin while outside the city, Volunteer units like Meath's received disappointing orders to go home. Boylan was even forced to find a ride to Navan in the north of the county to stop the mobilization from occurring at Tara hill. Seán Farrelly, who was active at the time in the Carnaross unit of the Meath Volunteers, was among those who had mobilized at Tara hill. Farrelly and his comrades were unaware that their orders were but a small part of an intended national uprising, and when their orders were rescinded they simply continued with the fund-raising dance they had organized that night before and returned to their homes the following day.¹⁷

Over the next few days, Boylan launched two abortive attempts to destroy local bridges and railways upon hearing news of fighting in Dublin, but desisted both times out of concern for the integrity of his intelligence.¹⁸ Finally, on the Tuesday after Easter, Boylan's men rendezvoused with other Volunteer units from County Louth and Fingal, the northern part of County Dublin. For the following week their force remained at Mulhuddart, a village on the

¹⁷ Seán Farrelly. BMH.WS 1648. NAI. p.14

¹⁸ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 212. NAI p.5

border between Meath and Dublin, trying unsuccessfully to break the British security cordon and establish communication with other insurgents in Dublin city.¹⁹

Meanwhile, Constable Bratton describes how a force of around sixty RIC officers was gathered in Slane in eastern Meath at the behest of local gentry, who feared the insurgents would attack Slane Castle. They were made to travel towards Dublin in search of insurgents, ultimately stopping at Ashbourne RIC barracks where they engaged in a shootout with rebel forces. Seven constables were killed, including the District Inspector, and thirteen others wounded. Bratton was driving a car and later personally conveyed the District Inspector's body to his home and arranged for the bodies of the policemen to be returned to their families. Constable Bratton was a republican sympathizer and was brought begrudgingly to London to be decorated by the King for his valor at Ashbourne barracks.²⁰ Chamberlain's report corroborates the number of casualties, and estimates that 400 rebels took place in the shootout.²¹ This engagement involved a huge number of belligerents by local standards, especially as early as 1916, and involved Volunteers under the command of Thomas Ashe rather than Boylan's Meath unit. The poor intelligence that crippled Boylan's operations during the Easter Rising and the chance, bloody confrontation between Ashe's Volunteers and the RIC convoy are representative of the brief and blundering violence of 1916.

Dismayed at their lack of action, Boylan's unit returned to their homes. The following Tuesday Boylan, his three brothers and one other were arrested by the British military at their home in Dunboyne, taken to Kilmainham Gaol and finally shipped to an internment camp at Frongoch, Wales.²² Apart from Boylan and Constable Bratton, none of the statement-givers

¹⁹ Scán Boylan. BMH.WS 212. NAI p.6

²⁰ Eugene Bratton. BMH WS 467. NAI. p.4

²¹ CO 904/99. NAUK, June 1916.

²² Scán Boylan. BMH.WS 212. NAI p.8

from Meath describe their actions during the 1916 rising. Oliver Coogan's local study of Meath during the period mentions eleven Meathmen on the public roll of honor as participants in the Rising, as well as four who were casualties.²³ Many had not yet joined the Volunteer movement. One, Luke Bradley, was working in a Dublin foundry at the time of the rising and joined James Connolly's Citizen Army, which fought alongside Pearse's Volunteers in the city. Bradley's unit took refuge in Jacob's Factory in Dublin and was subsequently captured, but Bradley himself managed to evade arrest and abscond back to Meath where he would later join the local Irish Volunteers.²⁴

In military terms, the 1916 rising was a failure, in Dublin as well as in the provinces. Notwithstanding the differences of opinion among the republican leadership and the difficulty with communication, public opinion was not on the side of the insurgents. Despite the popularity of the Home Rule movement, Irish society was unfamiliar and uncomfortable with visible and organized republican violence of the 1916 rising's magnitude, which turned the streets of Dublin into a war-zone reminiscent of France and Belgium. Without community support, any campaign of violence undertaken by Irish republicans was doomed to fail.

However, things would soon change for the better for both the organizational capacity of the Volunteers and the support the organization enjoyed from the Irish public. Outraged that Irishmen would commit such an act of disloyalty in a time of war, the British administration in Ireland came down hard, swiftly executing fifteen of the insurrection's leaders including Casement.²⁵ Followed by the widespread internment of captured militants in prison camps such as Frongoch, Wales, the draconian British response in Ireland was a miscalculation that turned what was initially widespread condemnation of the rising, to which Meath was no exception

²³ Coogan. *Politics and War in Meath, 1913-23*. p.54

²⁴ Luke Bradley. BMH.WS 1623. NAI. p.4

²⁵ Townshend. *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion*. p.279

according to Coogan, into sympathetic feelings for the rebels. Britain's harshness made it easier for the Irish to view them as an external oppressor, and easier for the rebels to enjoy the sympathy of their countrymen instead of being viewed as a fringe group of ineffectual criminals.

Meanwhile, the republican movement forged ahead even within the prison camps that held most of its members. Frongoch, where Seán Boylan was held, was an important step in the journey of many Irish republicans. While being held there after the Rising, they were able to meet and exchange ideas with other radicals. They were even allowed to maintain their own organization and command structure within the prison. Boylan remarks, "There were educational and language classes you could attend. The instruction and organization of this was done by the prisoners themselves and there was no dearth of teachers amongst them."²⁶ Galvanized by their experience as prisoners of the British and fresh from their courses in the "republican university" that was internment, republican leaders like Seán Boylan returned with renewed motivation, subversive expertise, and expanded professional networks with their revolutionary peers. Michael Collins, the indomitable and aggressive guerilla mastermind who would terrorize British agents on the streets of Dublin alongside his grim execution squad the "Twelve Apostles," also launched his career from the dank cells of Frongoch.

Boylan was allowed to return to Meath after three months in Wales. He noticed the thawing of public sentiment for his cause: upon his return he said that "the people in Ireland were more favorable to us now."²⁷ Public vitriol over his comrades' treatment by the British translated into shows of support like the Volunteers' Dependents Fund, active in Meath, which was set up to support the families of interned rebels.²⁸ The 1916 rising, militarily ineffective and even embarrassing, had a much larger ideological impact. Its potency derives from the questions

²⁶ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 212. NAI p.9

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.10

²⁸ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 1715. NAI p.1

it raised about national identity. British outrage and incredulity over the rising was rooted in their perception that the Irish shared a sense of their national crisis in World War I, and certainly a very large number of them did. However, the rising demonstrated just how disconnected some, albeit a small minority, were from a sense of British national identity. Later, Britain's execution of the rising's leaders raised the question of national identity again, this time provoking Irish identity to the advantage of the republican movement. This was a crucial moment – it linked armed, extremist rebels with mainstream Irish public sentiment and provided a context for incorporating them into the broader sense of Irish identity.

Internment and the British reaction in 1916 put the Irish revolutionary movement on ice for most of 1917 as local Volunteer units reintegrated – most of them had been decapitated by internment. One of the vital turning points in Ireland's revolutionary period came in 1918 when the British government threatened to impose conscription on Ireland for service in the First World War. Fear of coerced service in the bloodiest war in social memory translated into fierce political activism and even paramilitary participation as an alternative. The threat of conscription effectively 'forced the hand' of those in a variety of political dispositions, even those who had not previously been politically active. Meath's statement-givers were quite emphatic about both the war's role in their choice to join the Irish Volunteers and the war's threatening effect on persuading others to join their ranks. The 'Conscription Crisis' as it came to be known had a massive radicalizing effect because it put loyalty to Britain in mortal terms rather than abstract ideology. Consequently, it led to significant increases in paramilitary participation, generated social and organizational support for radical republicanism, and wrought significant changes in Ireland's political and electoral landscape. These factors, rather than the

abstract opinion and ideology that underpinned them, truly paved the way for the Irish War of Independence.

On March 21, 1918, Germany launched its largest offensive of the war, opening up a fifty-mile front that severely weakened the British Fifth Army.²⁹ Relief by the American Expeditionary Force was late in arriving, and the British Cabinet faced an untenable manpower shortage on the front. Reluctantly, they began planning to enforce conscription in Ireland to make up for the losses. Ireland's voluntary contribution to Britain's war effort had not been insignificant; 140,000 Irish enlisted between 1914 and 1918, adding their names to the roughly 50,000 Irish who were already in the British Army at the start of the war.³⁰ Before the war's end, around 30,000 Irishmen would lay down their lives on the Continent.³¹ Edward Carson's UVF and John Redmond's National Volunteers composed the majority of these.

Meanwhile, the issue of Irish participation in the Great War outside of Ulster was contentious at best (hereafter, "Irish" and "Ireland" will refer to the island excluding Ulster). The Irish Parliamentary Party began losing political ground to Sinn Féin, the party of separatist republicanism, when Redmond declared his support for the war – a polarizing decision that made the IPP a cold house for those with more anti-British leanings. Across the spectrum of Irish political opinion in 1918, it would be difficult to identify anyone outside the most staunchly pro-British who supported the idea of conscription. Since the war's inception, the carnage on the battlefields of France and Belgium appeared in newspapers' horrifying detail before the eyes of the publicly conscious, and the idea of being coerced into such a slaughter generated considerable anxiety in the Irish polity from the beginning of conscription in Britain. Perhaps

²⁹ Alan J. Ward. "Lloyd George and 1918 Irish Conscription Crisis" *The Historical Journal*, XVII, I (1974). p.109

³⁰ Keith Jeffrey. *Ireland and the Great War*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Chart p.7

³¹ David Fitzpatrick. "Militarism in Ireland, 1900-1922." in Bartlett, T. & Jeffrey, K. (eds.) *A Military History of Ireland*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). p.392

that is why, as Keith Jeffrey notes, the majority of Irish who did volunteer for the British Army around this time opted for somewhat safer service in the Royal Air Force over the regular infantry.³² Michael McGovern of Kells in northwest Meath was told that his place was “out in France fighting for his country” when he applied to the Board of Conservators for his recently deceased father’s job as Water Bailiff in 1915. Said McGovern, who would later serve as Quartermaster of the IRA’s Kells Battalion, “This reply upset me very much and had a big influence later in my determination to join the local Irish Volunteers and fight at home.”³³

Certain groups remained loyal to Britain based on ethno-geography in the case of Ulster, or on class in the case of those whose titles, property, or trade linked them inextricably to British power in Ireland. Luke Bradley of the Volunteers’ Fordstown Company laments: “In Fordstown Company we never had more than 14 men, the reason being that all, or nearly all, the small farmers and their sons in the area were of the loyalist type. I would not trust one of them or ask them to join.”³⁴ These pockets of loyalism made it difficult for the local republican movement to operate effectively and are an important nuance in understanding the success of the republican program.

By 1918 many Irish were freshly galled by the harshness of British rule and more accustomed to the visible presence of militant republicanism. This sea-change in public sentiment made 1918 a dreadful time to introduce the threat of coerced military service. Irish Chief Secretary H.E. Duke and members of the Cabinet were openly skeptical to Prime Minister David Lloyd George about the viability of conscripting the Irish. Duke remarked: “We might almost as well recruit Germans.”³⁵ Even arch-Unionist Sir Edward Carson advised Lloyd

³² Jeffrey. *Ireland and the Great War*. p.8

³³ Michael McGovern. BMH.WS 1625. NAI. p.1

³⁴ Luke Bradley. BMH.WS 1623. NAI. p.4

³⁵ Ward. “Lloyd George and 1918 Irish Conscription Crisis” p.110

George against it,³⁶ and opinions on the ground among the British state apparatus in Ireland were no better: Eugene Bratton, an officer in the Royal Irish Constabulary who served in Meath from 1916-1921 remarked, “As far as I can remember, the police resented this [conscription] to a man and I believe that had an attempt been made to enforce it, the police would not have done it.”³⁷ In a provocative study of Irish nationalist propaganda during World War I, Ben Novick describes one 1918 cartoon depicting Lloyd George as the henchman of the Devil himself, who beckons to an innocent Irishman. A poem reads:

Lloyd George, no doubt, when his life ebbs out,
Will ride a flaming chariot,
And will sit in state on a red-hot plate,
‘Twixt the Devil and Judas Iscariot.
Ananias that day to Old Nick will say:
My precedence here now fails,
So Move me up higher, away from the fire,
And make room for the Lawyer from Wales³⁸

Nevertheless, Lloyd George insisted on drawing more manpower from Ireland, a testament to the extreme pressure he felt regarding the war. On April 9, 1918, a manpower bill was passed including a provision for Irish conscription pending an Order in Council.³⁹ It was signed into law by Royal Assent on April 18, and almost immediately Lord French, the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland and who Ian F.W. Beckett calls “always politically naïve,”⁴⁰ called for

³⁶ Ward. “Lloyd George and 1918 Irish Conscription Crisis” p.111

³⁷ Eugene Bratton. BMH WS 467. NAI. p.4

³⁸ Ben Novick. *Conceiving Revolution: Irish Nationalist Propaganda and the First World War*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001). p.218

³⁹ Ward. “Lloyd George and 1918 Irish Conscription Crisis” p.114

⁴⁰ Ian F. W. Beckett, ‘French, John Denton Pinkstone, first earl of Ypres (1852–1925)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, May 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33272, accessed 9 April 2009]

more troops and recommended enacting martial law.⁴¹ The statement-givers from Meath recall with vehemence the enormous increase in support they enjoyed on account of public outrage over conscription. Seamus Finn, Adjutant of the IRA's Meath Brigade, recalled that his Battalion had great help in planning its attacks from an ex-RIC Sergeant named TJ McKliggot "who had earlier resigned from the police force as a protest against Britain's Conscription plans for Ireland during World War I."⁴²

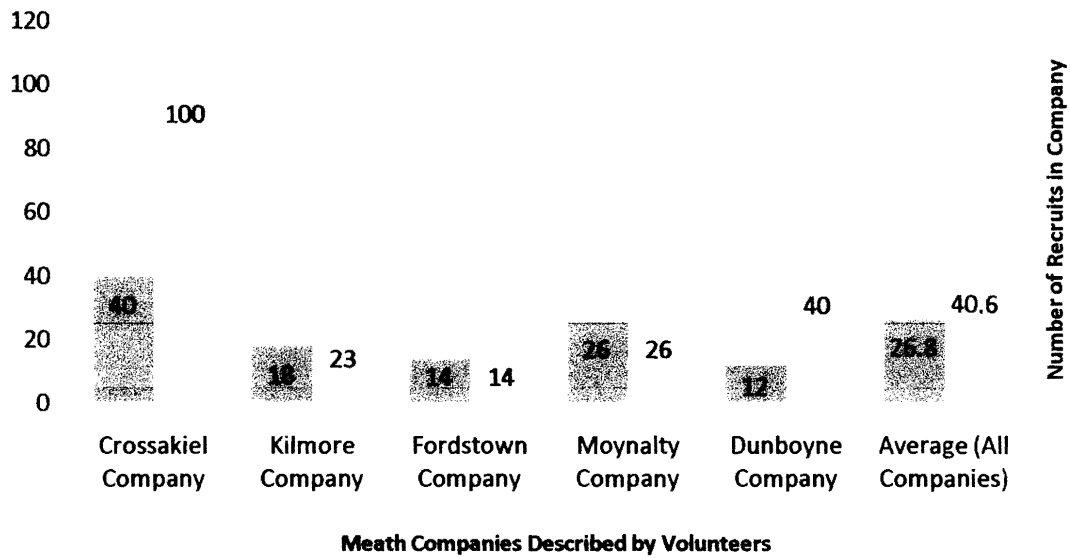
The first major impact of the conscription crisis was to boost recruiting for the Irish Volunteers in cases where their companies were organized and active enough to take advantage of the anti-British fervor it created. The increase in recruits and support allowed them to expand their operational capacity, ideological program, and public presence. Finn remarks that the strength of Volunteer forces in the 3rd Battalion area, Athboy, increased considerably and additional personnel had to be brought in to have them drilled and trained.⁴³ In several cases Meath's Volunteers explained the effects of the conscription menace on their companies, even using exact figures, as the following figures indicate.

⁴¹ Ward. "Lloyd George and 1918 Irish Conscription Crisis." p.117

⁴² Seamus Finn. BMH.WS 857. NAI. p.2

⁴³ Seamus Finn. BMH.WS 901. NAI. p.1

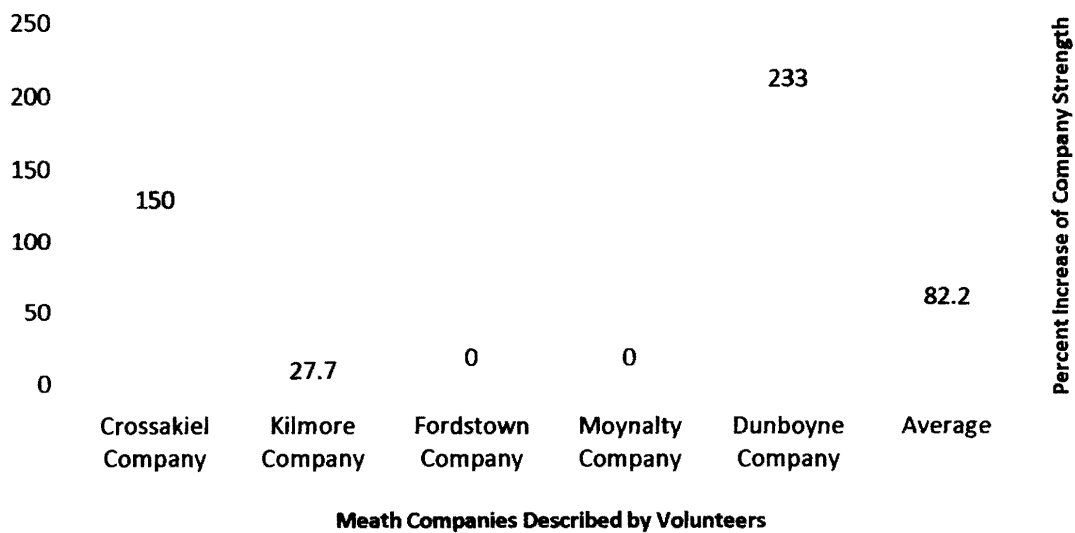
Figure 1: Increase in Volunteer Company Strength Reported in Meath Witness Statements, 1918



Pre-Conscription Company Strength

Company Strength after Conscription Crisis Influx

Figure 2: Increase in Volunteer Company Strength as a Percentage of Original Strength, 1918



Percent Increase in Company Size

Source: Volunteer Statements (BMH.WS), County Meath: see text.

Figure 1 above shows a sampling of recruiting increases based on the testimony of Meath's Volunteers. The sample necessarily uses the data only from those who gave actual numbers when discussing the effects of the conscription crisis on the strength of their units. However, it is notable that the two reports of no increase preclude the possibility that the Volunteers only report remarkable success. Of the five company areas they describe, recruiting increased by an average of 82% over pre-conscription threat levels.

This average should be qualified by the two reports of no increase, however. Excluding these two situations would make the average recruiting increase 137%. The discrepancy can be explained in part by the disorganization or suppression of the Volunteer units in those areas, as Luke Bradley says of Fordstown or Michael McGovern of Moynalty Company's comment: "In the spring of 1917, the company was still in existence but only in a very loose formation."⁴⁴ These statements raise an important issue: the success of the Irish Volunteers in taking advantage of radicalizing events and attracting people as a paramilitary unit was directly related to the viability of their local organizational structures. However, as David Hall remarked, recruiting "generally went up by leaps and bounds" where companies were already active and organized.⁴⁵ These conditions were necessary to bridge the gap between people with a political or personal grudge against British rule in Ireland and those who were willing and capable to take action in support of their feelings. They now had both a serious reason to act and a viable means of doing so.

Larger company size required unit organization to expand in training and weapons programs, which was facilitated in part by the subscription money of new recruits. Seán

⁴⁴ Michael McGovern. BMH.WS 1625. NAI. p.2

⁴⁵ David Hall. BMH.WS 1539. NAI. p.1

Farrelly, later the Vice-Commandant of the IRA's Meath Brigade, reported that the influx of money allowed the Carnaross Company to re-employ its two drill instructors from the period before the Volunteer split.⁴⁶ Measures such as these show how the conscription crisis helped the process of the Volunteers' transition from a social organization into a fighting unit.

Furthermore, Farrelly's comrade Seamus Finn describes how the Battalion, lacking firearms, took measures to have pikes fashioned by local blacksmiths and set about constructing a large supply of homemade bombs should it become necessary to defend the area against the forced imposition of conscription.⁴⁷ Though Finn's Battalion never had to use the weapons for that purpose, their preparations indicate more than just a superficial commitment to paramilitary activity such as drilling and parading, but rather a preparation for and enhanced capability of performing acts of violence, the viability or effectiveness of their armaments notwithstanding.

In a similar geographically-focused study, Joost Augusteijn profiles the larger process of militarization and arms acquisition in the counties of Mayo, Tipperary, Wexford and Derry. He argues that defiance in the form of armaments and public drilling was a crucial aspect of wider radicalization.⁴⁸ Likewise, David Fitzpatrick gives an excellent geographical assessment of Irish revolutionary violence, incorporating the data of Erhard Rumpf's path-breaking inquiry into the same topic in 1959 in order to illustrate the link between violence and the success of Sinn Féin's political agenda.⁴⁹ The link was quite simply an erosion of the image of Britain's strength in Ireland. Public acts that flouted their authority and later violent acts that undermined the

⁴⁶ Scán Farrelly. BMH.WS 1734. NAI. p.6

⁴⁷ Seamus Finn. BMH.WS 901. NAI. p.2

⁴⁸ Joost Augusteijn. *From Public Defiance to Guerilla Warfare: The Experience of Ordinary Volunteers in the Irish War of Independence, 1916-1921*. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996). p.78

⁴⁹ David Fitzpatrick. "The Geography of Irish Nationalism 1910-1921." *Past and Present*, No. 78. Feb. 1978
Oxford: Oxford University Press. & Erhard Rumpf. *Nationalismus und Sozialismus in Irland
historischsoziologischer Versuch über die irische Revolution seit 1918*. (Meisenheim am Glan: A. Hain, 1959).

perception of their strength only enhanced the public's perception of the Volunteers' strength and viability and thus their faith in the republican movement.

In addition to increased military training, Meath's Volunteer units were able to increase their public visibility as a result of the recruiting influx. Several of Meath's Volunteers including David Hall of the Kilmore Company noted the renewed ability to parade publicly because of his unit's enhanced strength. Augusteijn's analysis also highlights a correlation between increased drilling and increased Sinn Féin membership in Derry after the conscription crisis.⁵⁰ This public show of force was a vital tool for influencing public opinion, reinforcing the image that the paramilitary organization was flouting governmental policing and justice mechanisms and paving the way for later, more sweeping usurpations of public structures such as Sinn Féin courts. Establishing viable alternative sources of power and authority are often noted as necessary for success in classic models of revolution such as Theda Skocpol's.⁵¹ Similarly, delegitimizing the British state apparatus in this way was vital to successfully forcing a truce and the concession of an independent Irish state.

The second major impact of the conscription crisis was a massive organizational push to oppose it. This opposition brought together disparate groups in a new common purpose and enhanced the operational synergy of the many components of the republican movement, such as the Gaelic Athletic Association, the IRB, the Catholic Church, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Sinn Féin and others. Organizational cooperation gave opponents of the conscription crisis a medium to communicate with one another in political terms, ensuring the fluidity of ideas and crafting of ideology. It also gave them the organizational networks to mobilize support in

⁵⁰ Augusteijn. *From Public Defiance to Guerilla Warfare: The Experience of Ordinary Volunteers in the Irish War of Independence, 1916-1921*. p.82

⁵¹ See Skocpol, Theda. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*. (New York: Cambridge University Press 1979).

response to political issues. Social and political organizations were numerous in early twentieth-century Ireland. In fact, it is often difficult to distinguish between Irish political and supposedly apolitical organizations in this period. Because Britain was often perceived as the destroyer of Ireland's "original" Gaelic culture, cultural activism was a potent agent of political opposition to British hegemony.

The main example of this interplay between culture and politics is the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), a prominent feature in the organizational portfolio of many republicans, militant or otherwise. This ostensibly sporting organization had been at the forefront of the cultural battleground against Britain since the rise of "Irish-Ireland" nationalism at the turn of the century. Realizing the importance of the GAA, the British took steps to suppress it, mostly through measures that banned public meetings in summer 1918.⁵² Conversely, members of Meath's genteel Ward Hunt Society were widely seen as agents of British rule as most of the members were prominent unionists or even British officers. The Meath Volunteers later took action to break up their hunts in reaction to unionist lobbying for the continued imprisonment of Sinn Féin members, which Seán Boylan describes at length in his testimony.⁵³ The fact that both sides in the conflict took steps to suppress technically apolitical social organizations demonstrates their respect for the power of culture as an ideological tool. The ban barring members of British security forces from GAA membership remained in place until 2001.⁵⁴

Another powerful organizational force was the Irish Republican Brotherhood, which exerted a great deal of behind-the-scenes influence, certainly living up to its classic nickname 'The Organization.' Meath's Seamus Finn suggests that "The Volunteer officers were [IRB] members, the Gaelic League and GAA likewise were controlled, and later when the local

⁵² Ward. "Lloyd George and 1918 Irish Conscription Crisis" p.120

⁵³ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 1715. NAI. p.5

⁵⁴ Henry McDonald. "100-year GAA ban lifted on security forces." *The Guardian*. Sunday 18 Nov. 2001

elections were held and the Republican County Council was formed it, too, had its quota of IRB men. I would say that this fact kept all those organizations national-minded and sound.”⁵⁵

Coogan details the role of Seán Boylan as an IRB organizer in Meath, setting up IRB “circles” in several localities in addition to his duties leading the Volunteers in the county.⁵⁶ Later in 1918 when the British government imposed an Oath of Allegiance to the King on all civil servants, the IRB directed the GAA to expel all of its membership who complied.⁵⁷ Overt influence of this type was a redoubtable force in ensuring that the policy programs of republicanism’s multitude of social groups remained consistently radical.

The Catholic Church responded to the conscription crisis in a drastic manner. Though the Church had obvious ties to Irish nationalism as it was diametrically opposed to the Protestant establishment of Britain and unionist Ulster, it did not generally support of Sinn Féin, secret societies like the Irish Republican Brotherhood or armed and violent organizations like the Irish Volunteers/Irish Republican Army. For militants like those of County Meath, relations with the Church were often limited to calling a priest to take confessions before a combat operation. The threat of conscription would change this dynamic, however – a seminal shift that Peter Hart characterizes as the “loss of the Catholic Church as a counter-revolutionary bulwark.”⁵⁸ As the commentary of the Meath Volunteers demonstrates, Ireland’s Catholic establishment vigorously opposed the idea of Irish conscription and threw its formidable organizational and financial support behind efforts to prevent it.

The Catholic Church touched the lives of a large portion of Irish society in this period, and its adoption of anti-British rhetoric brought politics of a more radical variety to Ireland’s

⁵⁵ Seamus Finn. BMH.WS 1060. NAI. p. 68

⁵⁶ Coogan. *Politics and War in Meath, 1913-23*. p.185

⁵⁷ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 1715. NAI. p.11

⁵⁸ Peter Hart. *The IRA at War 1916-1923*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) p.14

mainstream audience. Seamus Finn notes that anti-conscription committees were set up “in every parish” and were “usually presided over by a parish priest or Catholic curate.”⁵⁹ These committees were also instrumental in raising money in the name of anti-conscription that could be used for parades, protests, and other public efforts designed to mobilize people against coerced service in the British military. Michael McGovern remarks,

During the conscription crisis the Parish Priest, Father Brogan, organized an anti-conscription meeting at which a committee was formed to oppose by every means possible any attempt to enforce conscription on Ireland. This committee organized a collection for the purpose and a sum of £140 was collected which was held by the PP.⁶⁰

The priests and curates that headed up these organizations were quite successful in mobilizing support and making public demonstration of their convictions. Seán Farrelly corroborates his brigade fellows when he describes one meeting at Bailieboro that featured “several hundred Volunteers and thousands of civilians. It was one of the biggest meetings I ever saw. Father O’Flanagan was a great speaker and could address his audience easily for an hour.”⁶¹ This particular comment demonstrates that Volunteer organizational work and that of the Catholic Church, while perhaps not presuming to work together officially, were certainly synergizing effectively to mobilize public support for their common cause. Normally an agent of establishment, it is a testament to the potency of the conscription crisis that the Catholic Church adopted an anti-establishment position so vehemently in 1918.

The conscription crisis also helped thaw chilly relations between different Irish political groups. In the run-up to 1918, Meath’s Volunteers had a particularly frosty relationship with the local Ancient Order of Hibernians, a non-subversive and traditional social organization that

⁵⁹ Seamus Finn. BMH.WS 901. NAI. p.1

⁶⁰ Michael McGovern. BMH.WS. 1625 NAI. p.1-2

⁶¹ Seán Farrelly. BMH.WS. 1734 NAI. p.5

supported constitutional forms of nationalism. The Hibernians disapproved of the Volunteers' acquisition and use of arms against the British state forces. According to Farrelly, they went so far as to slander the Volunteers as "paid German agents" and "Bolshies."⁶² However, when discussing the conscription crisis in a later witness statement, Farrelly describes how the AOH had "turned to them for protection during this period," and consequently allowed the Volunteers to use their assembly hall for a fund-raising dance.⁶³

Collaboration of this kind exemplifies the pooling of resources that took place between organizations with heretofore bitter disagreements in order to more effectively fight the menace of conscription. The role played by the conscription crisis in coalescing organizational support for radical republicanism was paramount, whether directly as with the IRB or indirectly as with the Catholic Church. Cooperation between these organizations was an effective way to communicate anti-British rhetoric to the Irish public, paving the way for new successes in Irish republicanism's political program. It also helped remove barriers to participation in the Irish Volunteers that previously would have given pause to certain Meathmen, such as young Catholics.

The third impact of the conscription crisis on Ireland's revolutionary narrative was in electoral politics. Republicanism made significant gains in this battlefield as well, culminating in an historic general election in December 1918 in which Sinn Féin won 73 of Ireland's 105 Parliamentary seats.⁶⁴ Such a resounding victory was a bellwether sign of building anti-British vitriol as the sequence of radicalizing events continued to escalate. Nearly all of Meath's Volunteers who gave statements mention their efforts in canvassing and campaigning in both a

⁶² Seán Farrelly. BMH.WS 1648 NAI. p.10

⁶³ Seán Farrelly. BMH.WS 1734 NAI. p.5

⁶⁴ Michael Laffan. *The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party, 1916-1923*. (New York: Cambridge University Press 1999). p.164

by-election that occurred in July 1918 and the general election later that winter. It seems their increased strength and expanded public visibility enhanced their ability to affect the political process. It also helped them support another part of their organizational matrix in Sinn Féin, which was progressing steadily as an umbrella for organizations that supported political and cultural opposition to British rule in Ireland while maintaining its ties with the militant Irish Volunteers.

Sinn Féin's general election landslide was foreshadowed in July 1918 when a by-election was called for the constituency of East Cavan and Arthur Griffith, president of Sinn Féin, contested it. Meath's Volunteers mobilized for Griffith's campaign effort, traveling to Co. Cavan on Meath's northwestern border to attend and police his election rallies. Seán Boylan notes that these rallies were harassed by members of the Orange Order and Ulster Volunteer Force who were attempting to break up or prohibit Sinn Féin's meetings.⁶⁵ Seán Farrelly also discusses the necessity of these policing duties at one particular event where Meathmen stood guard at a speech by Eamon de Valera, future leader of the Dáil, Irish Free State and later, Republic of Ireland, who was in Cavan in support of Griffith.⁶⁶ There was also significant public distaste for the concocted 'German plot,' a campaign of arrests by the British to crack down on supposed collusion between Irish republicans and Germany. Sinn Féin's election rhetoric took advantage of the questionable arrests of its members to argue that only it and the Irish Volunteers had effectively opposed conscription and thus provoked the ire of the British.⁶⁷ When the votes were tallied, Griffith won the seat for Sinn Féin handily, defeating the more moderate J.H. O'Hanlon of the IPP.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 1715. NAI. p.4

⁶⁶ Seán Farrelly. BMH.WS 1734. NAI. p.6

⁶⁷ Laffan. *The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party, 1916-1923*. p.149

⁶⁸ Seán Farrelly. BMH.WS 1734. NAI. p.6

The Meath Volunteers' electoral work would continue until the general election in December 1918, when the two constituencies of North Meath and South Meath were contested. David Hall lamented that Sinn Féin was not very well organized in the County and that the "main brunt of the work" for organizing their campaign fell on the Volunteers, adding that election hype generated "meetings galore."⁶⁹ Hall describes this work as collection for the election fund, organizing transportation of voters to polling stations and supplying guards for the polls to prevent supporters of Sinn Féin from being intimidated not to vote, though it seems unclear given the circumstances who was intimidating whom. Meath's Volunteer Commandant Seán Boylan commented that "all Volunteers in the county took an active part in the campaign."⁷⁰ Sinn Féin was again victorious as Liam Mellows took the North Meath seat over the Nationalist Dr. Cusack and Eamon Duggan won the seat in South Meath. Meath's Fifth Battalion O/C Seán Keogh recalls with glee hoisting a Sinn Féin flag outside a Royal Irish Constabulary station with some other Volunteers in celebration of the victory.⁷¹

Fear and anger over conscription in the Irish electorate gave republicanism the political capital to campaign successfully and was ultimately expressed in the final ballot results that favored Sinn Féin. Increased numbers and expanded public presence facilitated a Volunteer contribution to the electoral movement that would not have been possible the previous year and which was instrumental in securing the electoral victory itself. It is important to note that all three election victories involving the Meath Volunteers came at the expense of John Redmond's more moderate Irish Parliamentary Party, which Sinn Féin's rhetoric worked hard to link with

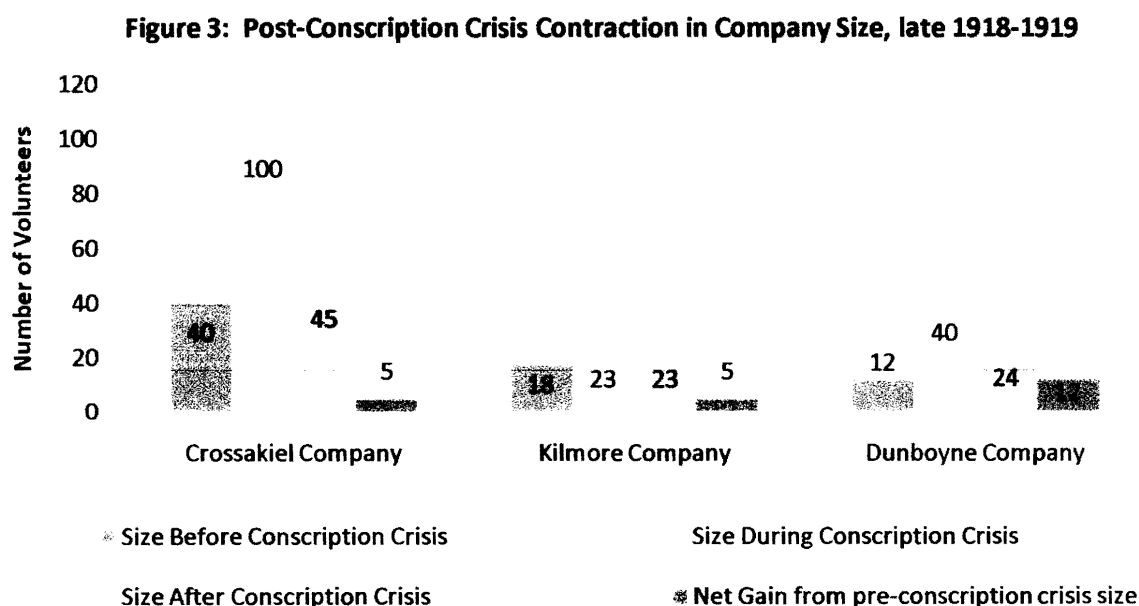
⁶⁹ David Hall. BMH.WS 1539. NAI. p.2

⁷⁰ Seán Boylan. BMH.WS 1715. NAI. p.4

⁷¹ Seán Keogh. BMH.WS 1615 NAI. p.2

conscription during the election campaign.⁷² Voters in these constituencies abandoned moderate opposition to British rule for a more radical, subversive approach in Sinn Féin, which had clear connections to republican violence despite dodging the issue in its election manifesto.⁷³ The 1918 elections, seen through the lens of County Meath, were the short-term culmination of the radicalization of Irish society so powerfully catalyzed by the conscription crisis.

Discussion of the conscription crisis' radicalizing effects must be qualified by noting that many Volunteer units contracted in size once the threat of conscription had passed with the end of World War I in late 1918. Several of the Meathmen discuss the ebb in company size in their witness statements, such as Seamus Finn's note that "many of those who had joined up during the conscription menace dropped out..."⁷⁴ A few were more specific about the magnitude of the losses, as the following figure indicates:



Source: BMH.WS (Co. Meath) – see text.

⁷² Marie Coleman. "Mobilisation: The South Longford by-election and its Impact on Political Mobilisation." *The Irish Revolution, 1913-1923* ed. Joost Augusteijn. (New York: Palgrave, 2002). p.60

⁷³ Richard P. Davis. *Arthur Griffith and Non-Violent Sinn Féin*. (Dublin: Anvil, 1974). .

⁷⁴ Seamus Finn. BMH.WS 901. NAI. p.6

Figure 3 shows the quantity of the post-conscription decrease in company size for the three companies whose members gave actual numbers. On the most basic level, it demonstrates that many of the new recruits in 1918 conceptualized enlistment in the Irish Volunteers as a direct buffer to conscription in that joining the paramilitary organization would protect or shield them from the possibility of being conscripted. That the likelihood of combat death was considerably lower in active service for the Volunteers at this time than it was for the British Army in Europe was another likely factor, as most direct engagements between Volunteer companies and British security forces would come later. Simply put, in 1918 the British state apparatus was not threatening the lives of many Irish, be they paramilitary or civilian, but the possibility of conscription changed that. Seamus Finn's discussion of weapons training mentioned earlier shows a more serious dedication to the ideals of physical-force republicanism, and suggests that Volunteer units at this time, new recruits and all, were committed to the idea of meeting violence with violence if necessary. Recruits were radicalized by a perceived threat to their lives of the same type the Black and Tans would present in subsequent years, when Volunteer participation would increase again.

The effect of the contraction was much the same as that of the Volunteer split. It left behind only the most dedicated and radical Volunteers and allowed the group to move forward from a new ideological juncture. The trimming of company size was part of a larger process that saw the Irish Volunteers in transition from their capacity in 1918 largely as election and community organizers to their violent identity as the Irish Republican Army when they would engage British security forces in the following year. Some of the Meathmen sensed this; one called the inflated company size an "organizational inconvenience."⁷⁵ Similarly, many report that business as usual continued after the fall in numbers and furthermore that combat training

⁷⁵ Seamus Finn. BMH.WS 901 NAI. p. 1

escalated. Seamus Finn notes that after his company contracted, “those who remained on fitted into our scheme work of organizing, and training went on uninterrupted.”⁷⁶ These comments help demonstrate that the organizational backtrack that occurred after the Volunteer split of 1914 did not also follow the post-conscription crisis contraction.

Ultimately, the process of radicalization from the outbreak of World War I to the aftermath of the 1916 rising and finally the 1918 conscription crisis made Ireland’s bid for independence more viable. While for many the mortal threat of conscription created only temporary commitment to the Irish Volunteers’ program of violence, its ideological and organizational effects were more durable. The larger size and greater activity of the Volunteers made their presence felt in the community at large, building vital recognition and public support that would be imperative once the conflict with Britain on Irish soil escalated in the years following. In a recent article, Joost Augusteijn also argues that well-organized and visible organizations were critical in the public’s acceptance of programs of violence.⁷⁷ It also fostered beneficial cooperation between different Irish political and social organizations that combined to both proliferate republican ideology and move it in a more radical direction. Furthermore, it swelled organizational support for radical republicanism’s electoral program, and in Meath and elsewhere helped ensure a massive, legitimizing victory that saw Sinn Féin begin not simply to oppose but to supplant the British power structure in Ireland.

Without these essential pieces of the puzzle, a revolution cannot possibly achieve success, especially against impossible military odds. Irish society was radicalized to support the ideological, financial, political, and military pillars of the revolutionary movement in the forthcoming War of Independence because it responded potently to questions of national

⁷⁶ Seamus Finn. BMH.WS 901. NAI. p. 6

⁷⁷ Joost Augusteijn. “Accounting for the emergence of violent activism among Irish revolutionaries, 1916-21.” *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxv. No. 139 (May 2007).

identity. The rising brought these questions front and center and the threat of conscription made them real, forcing many to consider exactly what being Irish meant. Their choices reflect a coalescence of this Irish identity that would continue in the following years.

In January 1919, Sinn Féin used its electoral mandate to create the First Dáil, which served as the provisional government of Ireland, while the Irish Volunteers were transformed into the Irish Republican Army. They fought a bloody war on Irish soil against non-regular British troops such as the “Black and Tans” and Auxiliaries, who were poorly disciplined and often responded to IRA attacks with civilian reprisals. The IRA, in Meath and elsewhere, systematically attacked RIC barracks, most of which were abandoned by the police and subsequently burned. In special units called “Flying Columns,” the IRA waged a guerilla war of ambushes on British convoys that had enormous human cost, much of it civilian. After nearly two years, negotiators from Sinn Féin hashed out a treaty with David Lloyd George that ended the war for Britain, but in Ireland it continued. Hardliners in the IRA and Sinn Féin, including Eamon de Valera its President, rejected the treaty, primarily due to its provision for partitioning loyalist Ulster into its own statelet, Northern Ireland. A bloody civil war ensued, wreaking even more damage on Irish society until the pro-Treaty forces of the new Irish Free State prevailed in May 1923. The Free State did not gain full independence until 1937, when the government under the reconciled de Valera crafted a new constitution that effectively severed all ties with Great Britain.

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