

The Irish Volunteers in Westport

Part III: 1918-1920

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The Irish Volunteer/IRA movement in the general Westport area has been well documented by some of those that played a role in its progress in the period 1913-1924. To-day's amateur historians have access to the personal reminiscences of many of the leading personalities of this period, since the release of the personal statements of such people as Eamonn (Ned) Moane, Tom Ketterick, Paddy Kelly, Paddy Duffy, John Duffy and Johnny (Seán) Gibbons. The statements were made to the Bureau of Military History in Dublin during the years 1948-1955, and an embargo had been placed on them until recently.¹ These statements paint a vivid picture of events and conditions in the wider Westport area during the above-mentioned period. Coupled with these, the books written by Joe Baker, Edward O'Malley and Michael Kilroy, and the series of articles written by Tony Lavelle in the *Western People* in 1964, and the files of the *Mayo News*, and we have a historian's dream.² We are deeply indebted to those men for what they have left to this generation, and it is up to the present historians to keep alive their memories by sorting out and presenting the information for the benefit of the readers of this journal.

Most people assume that the National Volunteers (Redmond's organisation) disintegrated completely in 1914, and that all of Redmond's followers took his advice to go and fight in France for Britain. Not so. There were pockets of these volunteers around the country still as late as 1917. On the fifth of August of that year the National Volunteers held their final convention in Dublin. At this assembly it was decided that a committee should be formed to 'negotiate and carry through a junction with the Irish Volunteer movement'; and pending the results of these negotiations, it was authorised in conjunction with the military staff, to carry on the work of the association. The negotiations proved successful and the two corps then merged in one after three years of separation.³ As 1918 dawned there was now one united volunteer movement in Ireland, and though it was officially termed the Irish Volunteers, it was now popularly being called the Irish Republican Army. (Hereafter IRA).

Young men were again being attracted to the disciplined organisation that the IRA was showing itself to be. As the ranks grew it was found necessary to put in place proper military structures to accommodate the expansion. GHQ in Dublin laid down military structures, so that there would be no variances in the

organisation. Up to 1917 each county was seen as a separate brigade. Mayo, for instance, was one large brigade area. This proved to be too unwieldy for what was, essentially, a voluntary organisation. The new structures now gave Mayo four brigade areas, namely North Mayo, South Mayo, East Mayo and West Mayo. Brigade staffs were appointed and the next phase of the new reorganisation scheme was laid out.

The basic unit of the IRA was the company, and where more than four companies existed, it was required that they organise themselves into a battalion area. The four towns in West Mayo then gained battalion status. All of the IRA companies in the Castlebar district became known as the 1st Battalion, West Mayo Brigade. Newport area was designated the 2nd Battalion, Westport became the 3rd Battalion and Louisburgh, the 4th Battalion. Each battalion then had to choose an O.C., Vice O.C., Adjutant and Q.M and any other battalion officer that they found it necessary to have, e.g. Intelligence Officer or Training Officer.

Conditions were becoming more favourable daily for the general expansion of the republican movement. Westport was very well organised and there was a genuine enthusiasm about for the various organisations. The IRA, Cumann na mBan and Na Fianna, were openly active, and it was no great secret as to whom was involved. One organisation, however, stayed in the background and played a significant role in events of the time. This was the IRB, (Irish Republican Brotherhood) that had been reconstituted at the beginning of the twentieth century and was always very strong in West Mayo.

All of the MacBride brothers of Westport Quay were IRB men, Joe MacBride being Head Centre for Mayo. When a young man showed leadership qualities in the movement, he would be closely monitored by the IRB and then approached with an invitation to join. Johnny Gibbons states that all of the prominent officers in the West Mayo Brigade were members of the IRB.⁴

Many lapsed their membership of this secret organisation when the first Dáil Éireann was proclaimed in January 1919, as they no longer saw any need for such a body to exist.⁵ The RIC were well aware of the strength of the various republican organisations, and the following extract taken from a confidential report from District Inspector Allen of Westport RIC, to his superiors at County HQ at Castlebar, shows how the situation in Westport was.

Westport is a network of secret society. The majority of the people are in the Irish Volunteers, Sinn Féin and their kindred societies, and those that are not, are so devoid of moral courage that I am satisfied they would not tell the truth on oath for fear of the consequences.⁶

In 1918 the 3rd Battalion (Westport) of the West Mayo Brigade of the IRA was as follows;

3rd Battalion Staff

Joe Ring, Battalion O.C.
James (Broddie) Malone, Battalion Vice O.C.
Charlie Gavan, Battalion Adjutant
Rick Joyce, Battalion Engineer
Bart Cryan, Battalion Intelligence Officer
Edward Duffy, Battalion Q.M.
T. J. Gibbons, Battalion Transport Officer
P. O'Malley, Battalion Communications Officer⁷

Westport Company ('A' Coy.)

Joe Ring, O.C.
James Rushe, Vice O.C.
M. Griffin, Adjutant
P. Lavelle, Q.M.⁸

Cushlough Company

John Hastings, O.C.
Mick Tunney, Vice O.C.
P. O'Malley, Adjutant
John Hastings, Q.M.

Aughagower Company

John Duffy, O.C.
Hubert Reid, Vice O.C.
Frank Knight, Adjutant
Tom Burke, Q.M.

Drummin Company

Broddie McLoughlin, O.C.
Pat Cox, Vice O.C.

Owenwee Company

Dominick McGreal, O.C.
Peter Joyce, Vice O.C.

Belclare Company

M. J. O'Malley, O.C.
Pat Duffy, Vice O.C.

Kilawalla Company

Martin Warde, O.C.
J. Lally, Vice O.C.

Events of 1918 would see many men being arrested, and this led to constant changes of the staff officers. The large-scale riots in Westport in March 1918 saw the removal of such people as Joe Ring, Charlie Gavan, Willie Malone, Tom Kitterick, Willie O'Malley of Drimurla and Ned Moane. These riots have been well documented in Edward O'Malley's, *Memories of a Mayoman*, and by the late Peadar O'Flannagáin, in *Cathair na Mart*, Vol. 7 No.1. Tom Derrig was also in Jail at this time for attempting to steal a rifle.¹⁰ The activities of the 3rd Battalion would now be severely curtailed for a few months while these men served out their sentences in jail. The Sinn Féin cumann members in the Westport area were also very busy at this time, and it is noted that IRA men were to the fore here as cumann officers; in succession Joe Ruddy, Johnny Gibbons and Edward Gannon, all volunteers, were acting as secretary in the Westport SF cumann.¹¹

By September 1918, Joe Ring, Charlie Gavan and Willie Malone were released. Kitterick and Derrig had longer to serve and were moved around to such jails as Derry, Belfast and Dundalk, where they took part in many of the hunger-strikes and jail riots. The British fabricated 'German Plot' in October 1918 saw the arrest and internment of Joe MacBride and Ned Moane.¹² On 9 November of that year another Westport volunteer, Michael Higgins, received a one-month's jail sentence for the possession of a revolver.¹³ The 'Great War' ended on 11 November and there was an amount of celebration in Westport, mostly by British soldiers stationed there.¹⁴ On the sixteenth of November, as a group of soldiers were drinking and celebrating in John McGreal's public house on Altamount Street, Joe Walsh, an IRA Volunteer, entered the pub and fired off a few rounds from a revolver. Walsh was later arrested and charged with wounding Corporal Poole of the East Kent Regiment. He was remanded to Galway Jail. After two court appearances, the magistrates discharged Walsh.¹⁵

Following the ending of the war, the British Government was dissolved and a general election was planned for December 1918. Joe MacBride, interned in Gloucester Prison, was the unanimous choice to contest the election on behalf of Sinn Féin for the South Mayo Constituency.¹⁶ This was the first time in ten years that the people had an opportunity to vote in an election. The Sinn Féin election machine went into action, and Joe Ruddy, Church Lane, was appointed as sub-director of elections for the Westport district.¹⁷ The election was a run-away success for the Sinn Féin organisation. In the South Mayo constituency, Joe MacBride received **10,195** votes, compared to **1,568** for William Doris of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Preparations were now put in place for the setting up of an Irish Parliament, the first since the infamous act of Union of 1800.

Tom Derrig had been released from prison in October 1918 and he was the unanimous choice to head the newly formed West Mayo Brigade.

West Mayo Brigade Staff 1919

Tom Derrig, (Westport) O.C.
Michael McHugh, (Castlebar) Vice O.C.
Edward Moane, (Westport) Adjutant
Michael Kilroy, (Newport) Q.M.

The Brigade was now on a very firm footing, and the next item on the agenda was to lay down a plan for intensive military training, to be undertaken by all officers and volunteers. Derrig and his staff operated out of an office in Westport Town Hall. It is important to remember that every man in the brigade area was only a part-time soldier. They all had regular jobs to attend to, and all of their activities took place after they had finished their daily work. There were few cars available to the IRA in those days, so the officers moving about to the various companies, implementing the training programme, had to do so on foot, or on bicycle. An officer training class was started in Westport Town Hall and lectures were given by Seán McMahon from GHQ.¹⁸ The First Dáil Éireann had been established in Dublin in January 1919 and this gave legitimacy to the IRA. GHQ would now be sending representatives around the brigade areas on inspections and presenting official commissions to senior IRA officers.

Westport Sinn Féin Cumann held its AGM on 1 February and the following officers were elected;

Westport Sinn Féin Cumann 1919

President, Joe MacBride. (Now a TD and still interned in England)
Vice President, Myles Hawkshaw
Treasurers, Pat Haran, Charlie Gavan
Secretary, John Gibbons
A/Secretary, L. Ó Coinín
Committee; Agnes Gallagher, Miss N. Heneghan, Joe Ring, Thady Walsh,
Tom Derrig, Joe Ruddy.

On 8 February 1919, Mrs Honoria MacBride of Westport Quay died. Joe MacBride got compassionate parole to attend his mother's funeral. Undoubtedly he would have availed of the occasion to consult with his compatriots in Westport before returning to prison. Both MacBride and Moane were eventually released from Gloucester Prison on 15 March 1919. Also released from custody at this time was Tommy Kitterick. On 29 March there was labour trouble in Mulloy's on Shop Street. Four volunteers from the Westport IRA Company were arrested and charged with the assault of Walter Brennan, a foreman in Mulloy's. The four accused were then marched from the RIC Barracks on James Street to where Brennan lay injured in his apartment at the rear of Mulloy's premises. Brennan

identified all four, Bart Cryan, Joe Walsh, Michael Staunton and John Berry. Berry and Staunton received three months prison sentences, Walsh and Cryan were discharged. On 3 May 1919, Thomas Connors, Drummindoo, was charged with having a rifle in his possession, but was found not guilty. The Milling assassination occurred on 29 March 1919. Westport town was placed under Martial Law for some weeks, giving great inconvenience to the populace. (For a proper assessment of this event it is well worth reading John Curry's article in *Cathair na Mart*, Vol. 23, 2002 and the *Mayo News* of 27 March 2002, for article by Cormac O'Cionnaith) On 24 May the British Military conducted large-scale searches of both business and private premises in Westport. Included in these raids were;

- Shanley's drapery
- Hawkshaw's pub
- Haran's pub
- P.F. Kelly's pub
- Ryan's pub
- Gill's pub (the Quay)¹⁹
- O'Grady's and McGreevy's, stationers Bridge Street.
- Hughes of Bridge Street and High Street
- Reilly's and Derrig's, The Fairgreen
- John Walsh and Tom Clarke, builders, Castlebar Street

The IRA was now seeking to arm its members in preparation for the eventual clash that would come with the RIC and British Army. Johnny Gibbons relates how every business in Westport was approached for finance towards an arms fund, and within a few months a sum of £500 had been collected. This was a considerable sum of money at that time. Charlie Gavan was nominated to go to Dublin to meet with the QMG, with the purpose of buying arms, especially service rifles. Gavan went on this mission, but he returned empty handed. The task was now handed to Tommy Kitterick.

Notes

1. The Bureau of Military History had offices at Westland Row in Dublin. For several years in the 1940s and 1950s they took statements from people that had served the national movement during the period 1913 to 1921. These statements were kept from the general public until recently, when they were made available to members of the National Archives for viewing.
2. Tony Lavelle was a well-known Westport reporter for the *Western People*. In 1964 he wrote a series of articles documenting the history of the West Mayo Brigade. It is obvious from reading his material that he had access to statements that had been made to the Bureau of Military History by local participants.
3. *The Irish Volunteers* by Colonel Maurice Moore.

4. From Witness Statement 927, by Johnny Gibbons, to Bureau of Military History, 1954.
5. The IRB continued to exist and was instrumental in persuading people in accepting the Treaty of 1921.
6. Taken from reel 130 of the *British in Ireland* series. (microfilm)
7. From 'West Mayo's fighting story' by Tony Lavelle in *Western People* May 1964.
8. From 'The constitutional basis of the national struggle', by Seán MacEoin, in *With the IRA in the fight for freedom.* (Kerryman, 1954)
9. 'B' Company, Owenwee had a series of different O.Cs. from 1918 to 1921, including Dominick McGreal, John McLoughlin and Johnny Kearns.
10. Derrig and Kitterick attempted to take a service rifle off a British soldier home on leave in Westport. They would eventually receive six months imprisonment for this escapade.
11. Edward Gannon was from High Street (originally Carrowkennedy) and he took up a teaching position in Ballina in 1919. There he became second in command to Tom Ruane in the North Mayo Brigade. He also became a County Councillor for the Ballina area and was Chairman of Mayo County Council in 1920.
12. The 'German Plot' was a ploy used by the British to remove prominent Republicans off the scene, so as to disrupt the elections.
13. Higgins was an employee in Shanley's drapery business on Bridge Street.
14. The crowd was about the size of a large tea party. Johnny Gibbons, WS 927.
15. Walsh appears to have gone without punishment from the IRA also for this unilateral action.
16. In those years Mayo had but two constituencies, North and South.
17. James Moles, Castlebar, was MacBride's election agent in 1919. To obstruct the work of Sinn Féin, the RIC would not issue him with a motor permit for the course of the election.
18. McMahon was Quarter Master General of the IRA in 1919.
19. Johnny Gibbons, WS 927, assumes that Joe Gill left Westport on a coal boat that was returning to Liverpool, and then made his way to America from there.

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