

# Westport and the Irish Volunteers.

## Part 1: The early years 1914-1916

*Vincent Keane*

The IRB operated, and sought to operate, under many guises since the abortive rising of 1867. Later, when the Land League was formed in Mayo in October 1879, the backbone of the organisation was composed of IRB (Fenians) members. Again, in 1884, the IRB was represented in the founding of the Gaelic Athletic Association. All of these political moves were part of the 'New Departure', which had been initiated in 1878 by John Devoy and Michael Davitt. Experience had shown the IRB that there were means, other than force, to combat the Dublin Castle regime. The IRB sided with Parnell when the split of 1890 occurred over the Parnell-O'Shea *affaire de coeur*. There was total IRB involvement in the 'land question' that dominated the Irish political scene, eventually leading to the formation in Westport in 1898 of the United Irish League.

During the Parnell split, William O'Brien, M.P., came to reside at Rosbeg, Westport. With William Doris of the *Mayo News*, and others, O'Brien established the United Irish League. This was another version of the Land League and was chiefly concerned with the redistribution of the large estates of the landlords. By 1900 there were 100,000 members in the UIL. This new organisation was yet another vehicle in which the IRB could operate overtly. Westport branch of the UIL was proudly known as 'the Parent Branch'. Weekly meetings were held at the town hall and these were reported verbatim in the columns of the *Mayo News*. This was the era of the great transference of land from the estates of the landlords to those that had been mere tenants for centuries. Westport branch of the UIL was to the fore in agitating for the division of the Sligo Estate, and the constant pressure exerted by the UIL was instrumental in having the various land acts passed in the British Parliament. Apart from the 'land question', the UIL was consistently monitoring the Home Rule debate, which was instrumental in bringing Parnellites and anti-Parnellites together in 1900, with John Redmond as leader of a united Irish Parliamentary Party.

In 1912, the Ulster Volunteer Force had been set up to resist the threat of Home Rule. From this action came the formation of the Irish Volunteers in Dublin in 1913. The new organisation spread enthusiastically across the country. The movement towards the formation of the IVs in Mayo came initially from Colonel

Moore of Moorehall in a letter to the local newspapers.<sup>1</sup> Darrell Figgis, at this time, was living on Achill Island and he claimed in a letter to the *Mayo News* that he had already established a company of volunteers at Dooagh.<sup>2</sup> The new volunteer movement came officially to Mayo when a company was formed in Castlebar on 14 February 1914. It is of interest to note that from the very beginning, the title Óglaigh na hÉireann was being used.<sup>3</sup> This would most likely have been from the influence of Eoin MacNeill and Pádraig Mac Piarais, both influential members of the Volunteer Committee.

On 7 February 1914, the controversial Canon Hannay play, *General John Regan*, was due to be staged at Westport Town Hall. Nationalist activists in Westport decided that this play should be disrupted, as it castigated the Irish way of life. A full-scale riot and baton charge ensued, both inside the Town Hall, and outside on James' Street, the Octagon and Peter Street. There were casualties on both sides and eventually twenty men with Westport addresses were charged with riotous behaviour. Many of the defendants were members of the UIL and the same people would surface later in that year as members of the Irish Volunteers. This, by inference, shows that the UIL was one of the vehicles by which the IRB continued its existence from 1858 right up to 1914. The 'General John Regan Twenty' were eventually acquitted at the Castlebar Assizes. The Judge, on the occasion of their release, remarked 'It is apparent that the jury has been got at.'<sup>4</sup>

The *Mayo News* of 21 March 1914 carried a paid advertisement announcing a public meeting for the purpose of forming a company of Óglaigh na hÉireann in Westport. At this inaugural meeting in the Town Hall, over one hundred men applied to join. Soon, weekly meetings were being held and the membership rose to two hundred by the end of April. The first instructors were Tom Tarmey, Pat Foley and Jim Glynn. By now, Ballina Company had 520 members, Castlebar 200 and Achill companies 300 members. Taking the lead, and help, from the Westport Company, new companies sprung up in Kilmeena, Derrygorman, Louisburgh, Islandeady, Lankill and Newport. Route marches were held weekly and the Westport Company participated in a huge military display at Castlebar on 12 July 1914. The newspapers estimated that 15,000 men took part in the events.<sup>5</sup>

World War One was now looming and the aristocracy was making overtures to the Irish Volunteers. Lord Sligo stated publicly, that in the event of a German invasion, he would join the Volunteers.<sup>6</sup> Eoin MacNeill said that the IVs should join with the UVF to protect the country. Across the country, the Volunteers were slowly arming themselves and the first show of force in Westport by the Volunteers was staged by the Derrygorman Company, which paraded 100 men, many of them armed, through the streets of the town on 23 August. They were

under the command of Pat Burke of Knockranny.<sup>7</sup> Orders now came from G.H.Q. to set up a Country Board for the Volunteers. Representatives from Claremorris, Foxford, Ballinrobe, Newport, Achill, Westport and Ballina met in Castlebar for the purpose. Westport area was represented by Joseph MacBride.<sup>8</sup> Officers were now appointed to the Westport Company, with Michael McGreal as Company Commander and Thomas Navin as Vice-Commander.

When the World War broke out John Redmond realised that he had little influence on the Irish Volunteer Committee. He now set about gaining control and he insisted on having twenty-five of his nominees co-opted. Redmond now was advocating that the Volunteers should go to fight Britain's war in France, as had the UVF. The IRB grouping on the Volunteer Committee resisted this move and the inevitable split occurred in the ranks. Now there were two opposing groups, the Irish Volunteers led by the IRB, and the National Volunteers under the influence of Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party. Every Company in the country had to decide whom it followed. In September 1914, there were 407 members attached to the Westport Company of the Volunteers. In October, the split occurred in this company and the Irish Volunteers stated that 240 men stayed loyal to G.H.Q. in Dublin. The rest went with the Redmondites or became uninterested. Joe MacBride was now elected commandant of the Westport Company.<sup>9</sup> The air was now cleared and it would appear that most of the outlying companies in the Westport area sided with their G.H.Q. Many of those that left to join the National Volunteers eventually ended up in the British Army, and it is currently estimated that at least seventy of those died in action in France and elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

Cumann na mBan and Fianna Éireann were also in existence in Westport by early 1915.<sup>11</sup> Following the founding of the Westport Volunteers Company, the boys of the town established a Sluagh of Fianna Éireann, the Irish National Boy Scouts. They were aided in this task by the boys of the Castlebar Sluagh, which came to Westport and camped on Joe MacBride's ground at Streamstown. The combined groups then climbed the Reek to honour the death of the great Fenian leader, O'Donovan Rossa. The Westport Sluagh became very active and weekly route marches were held to locations such as Islandeady, Kilmeena, Aughagower and Rosminney. Often, they would accompany the Volunteers on their route marches. Both groups had the use of Reilly's Meadow on the Quay Road (Cluain Ard) for outdoor activities. By late 1915, there were 60 boys in Sluagh Pádraic Sáirséal of Na Fianna in Westport. Their first officers were Tom Derrig and Willie (Liam) Malone.<sup>12</sup> In October 1915, Tom Derrig left Westport to study at UCG.<sup>13</sup> The Fianna Sluagh marched to the station with Tom Derrig, to see him off. Willie Malone then took charge of the boys with Seósamh Breathnach. Cumann na mBan held weekly meetings at the Town Hall from



early 1915. First aid, marksmanship, signalling, drill and history lessons were all part of their training.

In 1915, the British Army and Navy were recruiting heavily and meetings were being held in all the big centres. The Unionists and Redmondites were sponsoring this recruiting activity. On 27 November 1915, the combined members of the Irish Volunteers, Fianna Éireann, Cumann na mBan and the Gaelic League marched through Westport to honour the memory of Allen, Larkin and O'Brien, the Manchester Martyrs. The torchlight parade was led by the newly formed Cushlough Pipe Band. It was no coincidence that the parade eventually clashed with the British Forces recruiting meeting being held at the Octagon. A riot ensued and the RIC made ten arrests. Later, in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising, when a Royal Commission was looking into the events of the Rising, it was stated that of all of the towns in Connacht, Westport was pathetic in the amount of recruits volunteering for the services.

By 1916, Mayo had become a properly organised Brigade Area. Westport was given Battalion status and the various outlying companies became attached to the battalion. Natural leaders were now coming to the fore and a true patriotic Irish-Ireland ethos was emerging. Names such as Moore, Ring, Derrig, Malone, Kitterick, Gibbons, Duffy and Hughes were soon to make their mark in the events of the Easter Rising and its aftermath. Training went ahead steadily and prominent members from G.H.Q. such as Mellows, O'Rahilly, MacNeill, and MacDiarmada made inspection visits to the Westport Battalion. However, the Rising came as a complete surprise to the Westport Battalion, as it had been taken in by the confusion that was emanating from G.H.Q. and the MacNeill quarrel in Dublin.

#### Notes

1. *Mayo News*, 1 January 1914. Colonel Maurice Moore of Moorehall was a retired British Army Officer. He became Inspector General of the Volunteers and later envoy to Italy for the First Dáil. He took the Treaty side in 1922 and later became a Cumann na nGaedheal Senator.
2. Darrell Figgis was a controversial Englishman who had become interested in Irish political affairs. He lived at Dooagh, Achill, and was Inspecting Officer for the Volunteers in Mayo. He was interned after the Rising and he went on to support the Free State Government in 1922. He died by his own hand in London in the 1920s.
3. 'Óglaigh na hÉireann' was the Gaelic name given the Volunteers. The initials – FF (Fianna Fáil – Soldiers of Destiny) were also incorporated into the cap badge. In later years, both Republican and Free State armies would lay claim to the title and badge.
4. *Mayo News*, 4 March 1914.
5. *Mayo News*, 18 March 1914.
6. *Mayo News*, 8 August 1914.
7. *Mayo News*, 29 August 1914.
8. *Mayo News*, 12 September 1914.
9. *Mayo News*, 14 November 1914.
10. Information from Mr Feeney, Castlebar
11. Cumann na mBan was the ladies auxiliary of the Irish Volunteers. Founded in 1914 by Countess

Markievicz it stayed true to its republican ideals and did not split on the Treaty. Fianna Éireann was founded in 1909 by Bulmer Hobson and Countess Markievicz in response to the setting up of the Baden Powell Boy Scouts in 1908. Na Fianna gave many leaders to the national movement and stayed true to the Second Dáil in 1922.

12. Willie (Liam) Malone, like Derrig, was from High St. He became a leading officer of the IRA in Westport and was a member of the West Mayo Brigade ASU (the flying column). He was interned at the Curragh during the war of 1922-23 in defence of the Republic.
13. Derrig became very involved in the Volunteers – later the IRA. He was interned in Galway Jail in 1920-21 and when the IRA defended the Republic in 1922-23, Derrig became Adjutant General of the IRA. He was captured in Dublin and during an attempted escape near Oriel House, he was shot in the face, losing an eye as a result. He eventually became a leading member of Fianna Fáil and was Minister of Education in the first Fianna Fáil Government in 1932.

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## Silent Arches

*Paddy Guthrie*

*A stark imposing silhouette, stands silent in the night,  
Dark ivy slowly sucks its life, in the full moon's silver light.  
Nine arches built from cold grey stone, a structure from the past,  
A viaduct from other days, when things were built to last.  
The men who proudly raised it up, now dust beneath the clay,  
This monolith they left for us, the finest of its day.  
Once how proud it must have stood, in those distant days of yore,  
Twin rails of steel then crossed its back, bound for the western shore.  
In prophecy it was foretold, the cargoes it would carry,  
The death trains bound for Achill Sound, the corpses for to ferry.  
Young lives lost through tragedy, some by fire, some at sea,  
The best of Achill Island's blood was lost so tragically.  
It's many years since it last held a steam train on its back,  
The whistle, the hiss of steam, that thundered down its track,  
Yet who's to say what happens here, where mortals lie in slumber,  
Its ghostly track might echo yet, with the sound of ghostly thunder.  
There it stands, a cenotaph to those who passed its way,  
I pray that it be standing still, when I'm long passed away.*

Dedicated to the good people of the West and especially to the memory of the victims of the Clew Bay and Kirkintilloch disasters.

**Paddy Guthrie**, covey, mature student in VTOS, Castlebar in World Heritage, sometime poet and proud of his roots.

