

Westport and the Irish Volunteers

Part II: 1916-1918

Vincent Keane

The railway staff brought in news of the 1916 Insurrection to Westport. Newspapers were not printed for a few days and the townspeople were hungry for information. Eventually, papers started to arrive in the town, and the extent of the Insurrection was made known. Tommy Heavey relates how he saw Major John MacBride's photograph on the front page of a newspaper, telling of his execution. Mrs Joyce, the newsagent, then dispatched him immediately to the MacBride home at Westport Quay with the bad news. Heavey said that 'Mrs MacBride was deeply shocked and just bowed her head.'¹ As in other locations nationwide, the Irish Volunteers leadership was in a state of shock and disbelief. They had missed out on the fight through the confusion that had been brought about by the interference of Eoin MacNeill. All Volunteers had now to obey the ceasefire orders issued by the Commander-in-Chief, Pádraic Pearse.

Joe Ring, of Drummindoo, was the O/C of the Westport Irish Volunteer Company at this time. He realised that the organisation would crumble if remedial action was not taken immediately to boost the morale of the men. With his staff, Ring organised a route march to Farnaught Hill, one and a half miles south of the town. Here, Joe Ring and his officers addressed the men, and the message was simple, 'Mind your weapons, and soon your day will come again.' The RIC were ultra-alert now, and they had actually accompanied the route march at a distance, noting names of the men. The authorities struck after this, and thirty-three men from the Westport district were taken from their homes and places of employment and placed under arrest at the RIC barracks at Shop Street (Where the Allied Irish Bank is now located).

Those arrested were:

Joe MacBride, Streamstown	Charles Hughes, Bridge Street
Thady Walsh, Mill Street	Edward Haran, Drummindoo
Bart Cryan, c/o Hughes, Bridge Street	Michael Reilly, The Fairgreen
John Logan, c/o Coen's, Bridge Street	Patrick Kenny, c/o Brawn's, Bridge Street
Patrick Hughes, Lankill	James (Broddy) Malone, High Street
Hubert Heraty, Altamount Street	Edward Sammon, Peter Street
John Gavin, c/o P.J. Kelly's, the Octagon	Charles Hickey, c/o Breheny's, Castlebar Street
Martin Geraghty, James Street	John Berry, c/o McGing's, High Street
Manus Keane, Cloonskill	Thomas O'Brien

Pat Tunney, Derrykillew, Cushlough
Joe Ring, Drummindoo
Charles Gavan, High Street
Tom Ralph, Mill Street
Joe Ruddy, Church Lane
Joe Gill, Westport Quay
Tom Derrig, High Street

Owen Hughes, Lankill
Edward Gannon, High Street
John McDonagh, High Street
Michael Derrig, James Street
P.J. Doris, James Street
Darrell Figgis, Dooagh, Achill
Michael Duffy, Aughagower

The town was in a state of high excitement as friends and relations gathered on Shop Street, endeavoring to make contact with the prisoners. All roads into the town had been sealed off by a contingent of 120 British soldiers from the Cavalry Barracks in Castlebar, and it was obvious that the men were going to be moved out to prison elsewhere. On the evening of 28 May 1916, the men were marched to the rail station and put on board the Dublin train. However, they were taken off again at Castlebar and lodged in the Military barracks there for the night. Next morning, the prisoners were put on to the Dublin train again, and they were brought to the Broadstone Station in Dublin City. They were now marched through the streets, and they could see the full extent of the damage caused by the events of the Insurrection. Eventually, the prisoners were placed in the quadrangle of Trinity College. Again they were moved out, this time to the main holding centre at the barracks at Inchicore.² Next day they were moved again to the North Wall docks and put aboard a cattle ship for England. They were now broken into smaller groups and sent to various prisons throughout Great Britain. Twenty-two of the men would end up in the main internment camp in Wales, 'Frongoch University'.

All internees were now appearing before a prison committee that had the power to order the release or further detention of individuals. The first Westport men to be released were Martin Geraghty, Thomas O'Brien, Patrick Kenny, John Logan, John Berry, Hubert Heraty and Pat Hughes. Some of these men were sick and others had been interned without any reason whatever. Next to be released were Thomas Ralph and John Gavin. On 29 July, Thady Walsh, Michael Reilly, Bart Cryan, John McDonagh, Edward Gannon, Charles Gavan, Edward Sammon and Charles Hickey arrived home at Westport. On 5 August, Edward Haran, Tom Derrig, Michael Derrig, Michael Duffy, Joe Ruddy and James Malone were released. The remaining prisoners were all released in time to be home for Christmas. These included Charles and Owen Hughes, Pat Tunney, Manus Keane, Joe Ring, Joe Gill, Joe MacBride, Darrell Figgis and P.J. Doris.³

During the period that the men had been interned, great interest was shown at home to their predicament. Across the country, branches of the Irish National Aid Association (the INAA) were set up. This organisation gave financial

assistance and moral support to the families of the internees, and prepared for the eventual release of the men. Lists of subscribers to the INAA were reported in the local papers, and it was surprising to see who was now helping out financially.

Top contributors included priests, doctors, solicitors, etc. These professional classes had been solidly Redmondite up to this, and these defections were significant in that it indicated the fundamental change that was taking place in the hearts and minds of the nationally-minded people.⁴

The secretaries of the Westport Branch of the INAA were J.J. O'Malley (engineer) and E.J. Gallagher, The Mall. Not all of the leading Volunteer members in Westport had been picked up in May 1916, and it fell to them to keep the organisation active and prepared. Edward (Ned) Moane of Carrabawn, and the Malone brothers of High Street, Seán and Willie, were very prominent and hard working during these months. These men were also involved in setting up branches of Connradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League) in the town, Aughagower and Cushlough. As well as promoting the language, it gave ideal cover for reorganising the Volunteers. Concerts had become very popular and there was a great interest shown in singing about the events of Easter Week, 1916. The RIC now deemed it seditious if they found people singing these songs. This law was very difficult to implement but the RIC persisted, and they started to attend all concerts that were organised by Sinn Féin and Connradh na Gaeilge.

1917 was a year of great political activity and reorganising. A great convention was held in Dublin of all national and republican organisations, with the aim of coordinating all future political activity directed towards Irish separatism. Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers held their first conventions since 1915, and both organisations adopted radical paths for the future. A great sense of unity prevailed in 1917, and those that had come through the events of Easter Week knew that a great united national front would be needed in the coming years. To commemorate the 1916 Insurrection in Westport, tricolour flags with the initials IR (Irish Republic) were flown from prominent positions. 'Big George', at the Octagon, was one such site for the placing of a flag, another was Hall's Mills, at Distillery Road – now an old, derelict and dangerous building. This particular flag was placed ninety feet up on the building, and it defied all efforts of the RIC to remove it. Sinn Féin had reorganised in Westport, with Joe MacBride as president and Joe Ruddy as secretary. The organisation now had many clubs (cumainn) in West Mayo, and a Comhairle Ceanntair was organised to coordinate policy and activities. The officers of the West Mayo Comhairle Ceanntair were Myles Hawkshaw, Westport, president, Pat Tunney, Derrykillew, secretary, and Pádraic Ó Broin, Castlebar, treasurer.

In August 1917, the whole of nationalist West Mayo turned out for the

funeral of a young Volunteer who met an accidental death. Pat Hughes, of Lankill, had been bathing at the Point, at Westport Quay, when he got into difficulties. His companion and fellow volunteer, Bart Cryan, was unable to rescue him. Both had worked for Charles Hughes, Bridge Street. Pat Hughes was a son of Owen Hughes and both had suffered internment in 1916. There was a large impressive funeral on the occasion of his burial. All of the organisations dedicated towards working for an Irish Republic marched in the cortège. There was also a guard of honour of fifty horsemen from the Aughagower district in attendance.

In September of that year, there was a series of public meetings held in the town to highlight the plight of the political prisoners. The occasion of the death of the hunger striker Tomás Ághas (Thomas Ashe) saw all of the Westport organisations taking to the streets in protest. On 5 October, 500 people marched around the streets of the town in dignified procession, led by the Irish Volunteers under the command of Joe Ring and Ned Moane. Two prominent officers in the Westport Company of the Irish Volunteers were arrested in October for attempting to take a rifle off a British soldier home on leave from France. These were Tom Derrig and Tom Kitterick. After several court appearances at Westport, Castlebar, Dublin and Belfast, they were finally sentenced to six months hard labour in Derry Jail. Kitterick took ill at Derry and was removed to the Fever hospital at Cork Street, Dublin. He was released from here after a few weeks recuperation.

On 3 October 1917, the Westport Company of Irish Volunteers held a route march. Over one hundred men lined up in military formation at the Octagon. Ten RIC men had been ordered to attend by their superiors, and to note who was on parade. The Volunteers were marched out as far as the Quay, and on the way back they marched on the double, leaving some of the police way behind. The police were only able to identify some of the marchers, and the following list of names was sent to RIC Divisional HQ at Castlebar.

Joseph Ring, 27, Drummindoo, farmer's son⁵
Edward Moane, 28, Carrabawn, farmer's son⁶
John McDonagh, 47, High Street, plasterer⁷
Tom Kitterick, 21, High Street, messenger in Liptons⁸
John Flynn, 23, Bridge Street, lime burner⁹
Bartley Cryan, 27, High Street, shop assistant¹⁰
Martin Keane, 23, Bridge Street
Michael Higgins, 27, Bridge Street, shop assistant
John Fennelly, 27, Shop Street, shop assistant
John Berry, 20, High Street, shop assistant
Patrick Haran, 28, Bridge Street, solicitor's clerk
John Clarke, 20, Altamont Street, apprentice fitter

Owen Reilly, 24, Fairgreen, cattle dealer
 Charles Gavan, 20, High Street, shop assistant
 Patrick O'Malley, 22, Carnalurgan, farmer's son
 John Hestor, 30, Westport Quay, labourer
 Stephen Burke, 24, Doon, farmer's son
 Patrick McGing, 32, Doon, farmer's son
 James McGing, 32, High Street, tailor
 Martin Geraghty, 24, James Street, butcher
 Joseph Sullivan, 22, The Octagon, tailor
 Patrick Heraty, 21, Altamont Street, butcher
 Michael Murray, 27, James Street, shop assistant
 James Rushe, 19, Shop Street, shop assistant¹¹
 Michael Kearns, 21, Mill Street, tailor
 James McKenna, 21, Carrabawn, farmer's son
 Michael J. Giblin, 24, Churchfield, farmer's son
 Michael J. O'Malley, 26, Ardoley, farmer's son¹²
 Thomas Reidy, 19, Bridge Street, shop assistant
 Gus Lennon, 25, High Street, tailor
 Michael McNally, 26, Peter Street, tailor
 John MacEivilly, 22, Shop Street, shop assistant
 James Kearney, 20, Mill Street, tailor
 John Gibbons, 19, Quay Road, teacher¹³

Also included was a list of eleven identified Fianna Éireann members who had accompanied the Volunteers on the march. Eventually, the authorities decided to arrest only Ring and Moane. They were only held for a short time before been released.¹⁴ So ended a very busy and successful year for the Westport Battalion of the Irish Volunteers.

Notes

1. Tommy Heavey was but twelve years old then. He would later join the IRA in Westport, and he became one of the youngest members of the Brigade Active Service Unit (the Flying Column). Information from 'Tommy Heavey' by Michael MacEivilly, in *Survivors* by Uinsionn MacEoin (1987).
 Joyce's Newsagent shop was located where J.J. Glynn's shop is on Shop Street (Warde's).
2. Information from 'Derrykillew to Frongoch' by Pat Tunney in *Mayo News*, various dates 1932.
3. Information from various editions of the *Mayo News*, 1916.
4. Seán O'Mahony, *Frongach*, p 42.
5. Joe Ring's life has been well documented. He was Westport Battalion O/C of the IRA in 1920-1921 and was on the Brigade ASU. In 1922 he was a Commissioner of An Garda Síochána for a period before returning to the Free State Army with the rank of Colonel. He died in action in the Ox Mountains in September 1922.
6. Ned Moane was probably the hardest working person in the Westport area for the Irish Volunteers. A member of the Brigade ASU, he took part in all of the major actions. Staying

Republican after the Treaty, he operated a 'flying column' in the Louisburgh area during the Civil War. In later years, he joined Fianna Fáil and was a TD for the Westport area on several occasions.

7. John McDonagh must have been the oldest active Volunteer in the Westport Company. He had been an IRB member in 1900, when he was jailed for protesting against the pro-British element in the town during the Boer War. His son John was in the Brigade ASU.
8. Kitterick had a very distinguished career in the IRA. He was QM to the Brigade ASU and was responsible for acquiring most of the arms for the flying column. He stayed Republican after the Treaty and was jailed at the Curragh. In 1936 he was sent to Spain to monitor the Civil War there on behalf of the Irish Government.
9. John Flynn died a young man in 1922 of natural causes.
10. Bartley Cryan was a Leitrim man who came to Westport to work in Charles Hughes's drapery shop on Bridge Street. He became a member of the Brigade ASU. During the Civil War he was interned at the Curragh, from where he escaped, and then joined a fighting IRA column in the Dublin/Wicklow Mountains.
11. James Rushe was from Kiltimagh and worked as a shop assistant in Westport. He proved to be a very capable and courageous soldier. He was a member of the Brigade ASU and became an officer on the Brigade Staff in 1922. He remained a Republican after the acceptance of the terms of the Treaty.
12. Michael O'Malley of Ardoley spent terms in jail, and on one occasion he was sentenced to be birched.
13. Johnny Gibbons, the Quay Road, Westport, was from a prominent Republican family. A very capable organiser and a member of the Brigade ASU. In late 1922 he was adjutant to General Michael Kilroy. He was captured after the Free State Army took Newport on 24 November 1922. Interned at Galway Prison, he eventually made his escape and returned to active service. After the Civil War he studied law and became a solicitor, owning a law firm in Dublin.
14. Information from *The British in Ireland series*, reel 80.

Bibliography

Frongoch, by Seán O'Mahony (1987).

Survivors, by Uinsionn MacEoin (1987).

Mayo News, 1916, 1917, 1918, 1932.

Micro film, *The British in Ireland series*, reel 80.

Vincent Keane, M.A., National University of Ireland, Maynooth, a native of Westport, took early retirement from The Dublin Fire Brigade, and is now working as a builder in the Westport area.