

The geography of revolution – the case of County Longford, 1917–1921

Marie Coleman

Introduction

Why were some areas of Ireland more active than others during the War of Independence, and why did the areas of most activity change over the course of the war between 1919 and 1921? In the context of the Irish midlands, County Longford stands out as one of the most violent counties surrounded by areas where there was much less activity by the IRA. Even within the county there was a significant difference in the strength of republican activity between north and south Longford. This article will examine the factors that were responsible for the strength of the IRA campaign in this midland enclave, including socio-economic conditions, administrative decisions and failures, and the contemporary political context.

Much of the evidence upon which the paper is based comes from applications made by Longford Volunteers for military service pensions, granted to veterans of the campaign by the Irish government after 1924. Many of these documents are soon to be released by the Irish government. The paper will also include a discussion of these sources and the way in which they can be used by historians to advance our understanding of Ireland's revolutionary decade.

County Longford and the Irish revolution

Longford is an interesting case study for both political and military developments during the Irish revolution. It was the scene of one of the four by-elections won by Sinn Féin in 1917 that helped transform that party from a loose association of advanced nationalists, that still held onto some of Griffith's old dual monarchist trappings, into a distinctive political party with a coherent republican agenda by the end of 1917. The South Longford by-election, held on 9 May 1917, resulted in the election of Joseph McGuinness in the Sinn Féin interest. His margin of victory was small – a mere 37 votes – and was no doubt influenced by the intervention of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, William Walsh, in support of him on the eve of the election. It was the first contested election in the county since the

acrimonious 1892 general election that followed the Parnell split.¹

On a national scale, the election result was an important vindication of the Rising, as McGuinness was at the time serving a prison sentence for his involvement in it, and paved the way for the victories of Eamon de Valera in East Clare in July and W. T. Cosgrave in Kilkenny City in August. At a local level, it was the catalyst for the mushrooming of Sinn Féin, as local branches sprang up across the county in the latter half of the year. It was also an important factor in influencing many young local men to join the Irish Volunteers (IRA), which was also being re-built in the aftermath of the Rising.

Prominent national figures in both Sinn Féin and the Volunteers – including Arthur Griffith, Thomas Ashe, Michael Collins and Harry Boland – visited Longford on a number of occasions in the summer of 1917 to help establish both Sinn Féin clubs and Volunteer branches (indeed at this stage there was very little difference between the two at local level).² It was during one such trip that Ashe made a speech at Ballinalee in August that was deemed to be seditious and for which he was arrested and imprisoned in Mountjoy. He undertook a hunger strike in a demand for political status and was subjected to botched force-feeding, leading to his death in the Mater Hospital on 25 September 1917.³ Between May and October, approximately 30 Sinn Féin clubs were established in Longford, and by the end of the year it had one of the highest proportions of membership relative to population in the country.⁴ Applications made by revolutionary veterans from Longford for military service pensions, also indicate that Volunteer enlistment was strong in the county in 1917 as a direct result of the by-election.⁵

Longford stands out as one of the few counties in the midlands to experience a high level of violence during the War of Independence. It was one of the strongest areas of IRA activity outside of Munster and Dublin city. In the period from 1917 to 1923, Longford was the most violent county in Leinster, in proportion to its population, with the exception of Dublin city.⁶ At the height of the War of Independence from January 1920 to July 1921, it was equal only to County Cork in proportionate levels of violence.⁷ By contrast to Longford, its neighbouring counties of Westmeath, Leitrim, Cavan and Roscommon were relatively quiet during the War of Independence.

Given the above considerations, Longford is an ideal case study for the conundrum facing historians of the War of Independence: why some areas of the country were more active than others. It is questionable whether the conflict can even be

1 Marie Coleman, 'Mobilisation: The South Longford by-election and its impact on political mobilisation', in Joost Augusteijn (ed), *The Irish revolution, 1913-1923* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 55-62.

2 A. T. Q. Stewart (ed.), *Michael Collins: The secret file* (Belfast, 1997), pp. 12-19.

3 Coleman, 'Mobilisation', p. 63.

4 Marie Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish revolution, 1910-1923* (Dublin, 2002), pp. 70-72.

5 Coleman, 'Mobilisation', p. 64.

6 Peter Hart, 'The geography of revolution in Ireland', in Peter Hart, *The IRA at War, 1916-1923* (Oxford, 2003), p. 36, Table 1.

7 Hart, 'The geography of revolution', p. 39, Map 4.

described as a war in a national sense, or whether it is more appropriate to see it as a series of local uprisings, lacking any co-ordination or much central direction from IRA General Headquarters. There is also the related question of why some areas of the country were active at different times. For example, Wexford was the last area to surrender in 1916, but failed to rejoin the fray to any great extent in 1919, and the IRA in Mayo only got really active in the last period of the war in 1921. Even within Longford, there was a significant discrepancy in activity between the northern and southern halves of the county, with IRA activity being effectively limited to a small area encompassing Granard and Ballinalee in the north of the county.

The geography of revolution

The late Canadian historian, Peter Hart, attempted to answer these questions as comprehensively as possible in an article on ‘The geography of revolution in Ireland’, that sought to draw together the explanations of both revolutionary veterans and historians.⁸ Volunteers from inactive areas often cited the lack of adequate arms and ammunition as the reason for their poor performance during the war, an excuse dismissed by Hart who felt that ‘the acquisition of arms was necessarily a result of IRA operations, as well as a precondition for them’ and showed that there was very little link between arms raids in 1917–1919 and IRA activity during the War of Independence. Those units which were most active in shooting tended to be active in all aspects of the conflict, including raiding and arson attacks. His analysis would appear to hold true for Longford, where there were not many arms raids before 1919, but that did not stop the local IRA carrying out a number of successful raids in 1920 that armed them to carry on an active campaign against the crown forces in 1920 and 1921. It is hard not to conclude that local IRA initiative, rather than the possession of the arms in the first place, was an important factor in determining activity.

Hart rejected the notion that physical geography affected IRA activity; referring to Longford he noted that ‘Even a glance at a map shows that the most rugged parts of Ireland were not necessarily the most active. Longford and Clare are not noticeably mountainous, while Donegal, Mayo and Galway were not violent ... Terrain was not an important factor nationwide’. Nevertheless, there was a significant difference in physical terrain between north and south Longford. North Longford had much smaller fields and an abundance of hedges and ditches and this was seen by the local IRA as significant for carrying on a successful guerrilla campaign: ‘In these skirmishes the small size of fields played their part for they are barely half an acre and an acre would be considered as a good sized field’. Such terrain assisted escape of north Longford flying column after the Clonfin ambush.⁹

The presence of a hostile element within the community has sometimes been cited as a provocation for IRA activity. The two main engagements between the IRA and the crown forces in Longford during the War of Independence – the

8 Except where otherwise indicated, this section is based on Hart, ‘The geography of revolution’.

9 National Archives of Ireland, Bureau of Military History, Witness Statement 496: Comdt Francis [Frank] Davis.

Battle of Ballinalee in November 1920 and the Clonfin ambush in February 1921 – were both a direct consequence of the presence and harassing activities of the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries. It is difficult to say if a strong crown force presence was a symptom of IRA activity in the first place, or the cause of it. Either way, Hart's hypothesis that the War of Independence consisted of an escalation of tit-for-tat attacks is plausible.

Traditionally veterans of the revolution saw the War of Independence as drawing its strength mainly from rural Ireland and many historians characterized late nineteenth and early twentieth century Irish nationalism as a predominantly rural phenomenon. More recent research on Cork by Peter Hart and Dublin city by Joost Augusteijn has highlighted the significance of urban guerrillas in the revolutionary movement.¹⁰ This is not a debate that the case of Longford can contribute much to, as the county was predominantly rural; the 1911 census recorded only twelve per cent of the population living in the two largest urban centres, Longford town and Granard.¹¹ Nevertheless, IRA activity was most intense in the rural parts of north Longford, while Longford town was relatively inactive, although that might have had more to do with the presence of an army barracks; so-called 'garrison towns' were not very active in the War of Independence.

Continuing to examine the relationship between rurality and IRA activity, some historians consider a tradition of agrarian agitation from the nineteenth century to have pre-figured subsequent IRA activity, a situation that cannot be said to have existed in Longford, which did not experience high levels of Land League activity in the 1870s and 1880s. Relative economic prosperity also appears to have affected the emergence of the IRA in rural areas and the presence of a strong cohort of small and medium farmers is often seen as a significant factor in this regard. By contrast, the IRA appears to have been less prominent in the most prosperous farming areas. This factor appears to have been important in the case of Longford, which was not a prosperous county agriculturally; two-thirds of the population lived on holdings valued at £15 or under.¹²

The curtailment of emigration in 1916, aimed at stopping valuable manpower leaving the country in wartime, resulted in the presence of a surplus of young men whose traditional release valve had been closed off. Michael Laffan believed this was a significant factor in the popularity of Sinn Féin.¹³ One possible alternative for these young men was farming, but the land redistribution activities of the Land Commission and Congested Districts Board had effectively stalled during the First World War also, contributing to a re-emergence of land trouble in 1917 and 1918. Did these men join the IRA as an expression of their frustration?

Peter Hart does not believe they did, highlighting the fact that the numbers who would have emigrated were analogous to those that enlisted in the army.

10 Peter Hart, *The IRA and its enemies: Violence and community in Cork, 1916-1923* (Oxford, 1998), Joost Augusteijn, *From public defiance to guerrilla warfare: The experience of ordinary volunteers in the Irish War of Independence, 1916-1921* (Dublin, 1996).

11 Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish revolution*, p. 6.

12 Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish revolution*, p. 173.

13 Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin party, 1916-1923* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 188-9.

However, this reasoning fails to take account of a county like Longford, where approximately 200 men emigrated annually until 1916, when voluntary recruitment also effectively ceased, indicating that those who had not emigrated had not enlisted either.¹⁴ While emigration rates from Longford were not high, it is plausible to suggest that some of those who did not emigrate, enlist, or succeed in obtaining land, found an outlet for their energies in republican politics and militarism.

In an article published in 1978, the Trinity College historian David Fitzpatrick put forward the hypothesis that the IRA was more likely to emerge from areas of the country where the police had been less effective in the years before the revolution, using the statistics for successful prosecution of cases as the indicator of police efficiency.¹⁵ The ability of the police to bring prosecutions declined overall between 1916 and 1919, and Longford was no exception as the following table indicates:

Table: Rate of prosecution to number of known indictable offences (%)

	Longford	Leinster	Leinster (ex Dublin)
1916	88.2	69.7	99
1917	71.7	69.0	91.4
1918	66.6	51.5	62.8
1919	62.16	42.5	57.8

Source: *Judicial Statistics of Ireland, 1916-1919*

The strength of the IRA in Longford reflected the strength of republicanism generally, as both the other main republican organizations – Sinn Féin and Cumann na mBan – tended to be strongest where the IRA was strongest also, especially in north Longford. In this regard, Longford's republican tradition, going back to the United Irishmen at Ballinamuck in 1798, appears to have been an important factor in motivating some to become involved in revolutionary politics in the 1910s. The memory of the United Irish revolt was still fresh in many minds owing to the centenary celebrations in 1898.

The cultural nationalist revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is often seen as playing an important role in the formation of the revolutionary generation. Prominent republicans, including Michael Collins, Harry Boland and Eoin O'Duffy, formed their cultural identities and gained valuable organizational experience that they would later bring to running Sinn Féin, Dáil Éireann and the IRA, from their local branches of the Gaelic League and the GAA.¹⁶ However, neither the GAA nor the Gaelic League was particularly strong in Longford, and the Longford IRA leader, Seán MacEoin, considered the GAA to

14 Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish revolution*, pp. 173-4.

15 David Fitzpatrick, 'The geography of Irish nationalism, 1910-1921', in *Past and Present*, no. 78 (1978), pp. 121-2.

16 See for example, Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy: A self-made hero* (Oxford, 2005) and Peter Hart, *Mick: The real Michael Collins* (London, 2005).

be a distraction for the IRA, so it would appear that cultural nationalism was not a significant influence on republicanism in Longford.¹⁷

Explaining Longford's revolution

Aside from the explanations put forward by other historians and dealt with in the preceding sections, other factors explain the strength of revolutionary sentiment and activity in Longford. The IRA in Longford enjoyed good relations with IRA General Headquarters (GHQ) in Dublin. This was due in part to the relations forged during 1917 with Collins and others who came to the county to organize Sinn Féin and the Volunteers, which were enhanced by Collins's many visits to the county because of his close association with the Kiernans in Granard. The proximity of Longford to Dublin and the convenience of railroad transport strengthened this relationship also. As a result the Longford IRA took much of its direction from GHQ. This was not necessarily true of the IRA nationally.¹⁸

The Longford IRA also benefited from good local leadership. The idea that good local leaders influenced IRA activity was common among veterans who wrote about the conflict subsequently, but has come to be seen as an old-fashioned idea by more recent historians, especially David Fitzpatrick, who wondered: 'Did Longford outdo its neighbours in violence because of the personality of a single blacksmith?' and felt that 'Without willing helpers the blacksmith of Ballinalee [Seán MacEoin] could not have set Longford alight; without the blacksmith, the helpers would have found another leader.' Nevertheless, the rapid decline of IRA activity in Longford following MacEoin's arrest in March 1921, and the failure to find a suitable replacement for him, would appear to contradict Fitzpatrick's analysis.¹⁹

Family dynamics also appear to have played an important part in republican activism in Longford. Just as in Cork, where 'republicanism seemed to run in families', certain families in Longford were very active, such as the MacEoins on the military side and the McGuinnesses on the political. Seán MacEoin was the commander of the IRA's north Longford flying column and his brothers, James and Andrew, were also in the IRA. His sisters, Helena and Mary, were among the chief organizers of Cumann na mBan in Ballinalee. The Sinn Féin TD for Longford, Joseph McGuinness, spent much of the revolutionary period in prison, allowing his brother Frank to emerge as one of the most senior party members locally. Four of their nieces, Margaret, Bridget and Maureen McGuinness (who lived with Frank McGuinness and his wife in Longford town), and Bridget Lyons who was a medical student at University College Galway, were heavily involved in the activities of Cumann na mBan.²⁰

Joost Augusteijn has identified another aspect of family composition that appears to have had an impact on young men becoming active in the IRA – the absence of a father:

17 Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish revolution*, p. 177.

18 Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish revolution*, pp. 164-70.

19 Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish revolution*, p. 162.

20 Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish revolution*, pp. 183-4.

A striking characteristic of the Volunteers, in several cases, was the absence of a father. Of the eight veterans that I spoke to in Mayo, five had an absent or dead father, while two of the others had a father active in Sinn Féin. ... The fathers of two of the main organizers in South Tipperary, Seán Treacy and Dan Breen, were dead.²¹

This was also the case with Seán MacEoin in Longford; his father died in 1913 when Seán was twenty years old. The absence of paternal control, that might have deterred such young men from joining a revolutionary organization, is another factor worthy of consideration when trying to explain their actions and motivations.

Evidence from military service pension applications

Much of the evidence upon which this article is based is derived from applications made by Longford IRA veterans for military service pensions. These pensions were first introduced by the Cumann na nGaedheal government in 1924, largely in response to the army mutiny, and provided compensation for those who had fought in the revolution and in the national army during the Civil War. In 1934 their remit was extended considerably by Fianna Fáil to include anti-Treaty republicans, Civil War neutrals and Cumann na mBan. Over 18,000 of the 80,000 who applied for pensions between 1924 and 1958 were successful.²²

Up to the present, once of the biggest collections of documents relating to these pensions is to be found in the Seán MacEoin papers in the Archives Department of University College Dublin. The documents in question are copies of applications from Longford. Over 400 of these relate to the IRA, and over 100 to Cumann na mBan. Very soon the government will release the official pensions archive, opening up many new avenues of research for historians. Applicants for pensions had to fill in a detailed form outlining their activities at different stages of the conflict and attend oral interviews. The evidence of former officers who acted as referees was very significant in deciding whether a pension should be awarded or not.

These documents obviously cannot be taken completely at face value and a measure of caution needs to be exercised in relying upon the evidence contained in them. The main purpose of applying was monetary reward, although many veterans also wanted to receive the accompanying Certificate of Military Service that attested to their role in the revolution. The evidence will also be incomplete as a number of republicans who did not recognize the independent Irish state refused to apply.

In relation to Longford, the documents in the MacEoin papers are applications and it is unclear how many of the applicants were successful in convincing the assessors that their service warranted a pension. Other documents that I have seen since I used the MacEoin papers will also lead to my being more judicious in using

21 Joost Augusteijn, 'The importance of being Irish: Ideals and Volunteers in Mayo and Tipperary', in David Fitzpatrick (ed.) *Revolution? Ireland, 1917-1923* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 33-4.

22 Marie Coleman, 'Military Service Pensions for veterans of the Irish revolution (1916-1923)', in *War in History*, vol. 20 (forthcoming, 2013).

these sources, especially in regard to Longford. In 1945 the Referee, Tadhg Forbes, who was the chairman of the board which assessed the applications, suspected that members of the Old IRA in Longford were colluding to enhance their former comrades' chances of success:

There are grave grounds for suspicion, but no positive proof to date, that there were a good many cases of blatant fraud in this county. To say that the Chairman of the Brigade Committee, Seán MacEoin, was irresponsibly credulous is to strain charity.²³

In 1946, one Longford pensioner, Michael Ryan, was prosecuted for falsely claiming higher rank in IRA, but the case was dismissed for lack of evidence.²⁴ Where possible I have sought evidence other than that contained in the pensions applications to corroborate testimony, or to call it into question. However, some of the evidence in my book on Longford derives solely from the pension applications. Therefore, when the full archive is released I will have to examine it in detail to consider whether or not any of my conclusions need to be revised.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested a number of reasons why Longford outdid 'its neighbours in violence' during the Irish War of Independence.²⁵ Socio-economic factors were significant in that physical geography, the rural nature of the county, family connections and the relative lack of economic prosperity appear to have been factors in both compelling republicanism and enabling guerrilla activity.

Administrative factors served to provide eager recruits for the Irish Volunteers, and allowed them to conduct their activities relatively free from official interference. These factors included the decreasing ability of the police to prosecute crime as successfully in the years following the Rising as they had done before it. Also relevant was the curtailment of emigration. This left a cohort of disaffected young men in the county, whose needs were not being met by land distribution. By 1920 and 1921 the presence of a considerable body of crown forces provided a target for the IRA.

Political considerations were probably the most significant in explaining the strength of republicanism in revolutionary Longford. The most important event in the county during these years was the 1917 by-election. It was the stimulus for the growth of republican organizations – Sinn Féin, the Irish Volunteers (IRA) and Cumann na mBan – and motivated many young men and women to join these groups at an early phase of the revolution. The disparity in activity between north and south Longford appears to be due in part to the traditional strength of republican sentiment in the north of the county, dating back to 1798. The Longford IRA also benefited from good leadership, initiative in carrying out raids for arms to

23 Report of Referee, T. Mac Fírbhisigh, 11 December 1945, National Archives of Ireland, Department of an Taoiseach S13602A.

24 *Irish Times*, 25 and 26 April 1946.

25 Fitzpatrick, 'The geography of Irish nationalism', p. 117.

enable it execute a successful guerrilla war, and a close working relationship with IRA General Headquarters in Dublin.

The case of Longford does not necessarily apply in other areas of the country. In fact, the IRA in other parts of the country might well have been active for exactly the opposite reasons; in Cork, distance from IRA GHQ appears to have been more important than close contact with it. Such ongoing conundrums and controversies explain the enduring fascination of the Irish War of Independence for historians and the upcoming release of the military service pensions archive will simultaneously help us find more answers but also provoke more questions.