

# Forsaking Nationalists for Republicans: Watershed Elections in the Midlands, 1917–1920

John Burke

The course charted by Irish politics in the Midlands after the rebellion of Easter 1916 can lead observers of history to few conclusions other than that there was a political sea-change in the offing. Advanced nationalist sentiment in the shape of Sinn Féin policy was growing at an exponential rate, while, conversely, support for the dominant Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) was in freefall. However, by 1917 the move away from the more established political party was still evidenced mainly in anecdotal terms; through reports of rhetoric at meetings, local authority debates and editorial commentary in local press publications. More certain evidence of change and realignment came as a reorganised Sinn Féin contested by-elections in the spring and summer of that year, by-elections that saw some midlands constituencies come to the fore of Irish political life. Contests in North Roscommon and South Longford provided certain evidence of the IPP's waning influence, and also laid the groundwork for a more comprehensive assault on Ireland's constitutional nationalist party. This assault was to evince its success in the political litmus test of the 1918 general election, an election which saw the constituencies of Westmeath and South Roscommon stage memorable campaigns, as incumbent battled incumbent and a newcomer tackled the old guard. The push for a comprehensive dislodgement of the IPP ensured that local authorities also needed to be targeted, with the opportunity presented in January 1920 capitalised on by both Sinn Féin and the Labour Party whose efforts ensured that a very different political landscape began to take shape.

## **North Roscommon By-election**

Traditionally seen as a volatile area politically, the northern part of Co. Roscommon had often played host to clashes between parties and individuals holding quite different views. Perhaps best evidenced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when land ownership disputes were ongoing, the targeting of the by-election by advanced nationalists highlighted their view that an area with a history of such fractiousness could deliver a political upset. Called in response to the death of the IPP incumbent J.J. O'Kelly, the poll of the local electorate on 3 February 1917 was to be the first occasion that Sinn Féin, newly invigorated and increasingly

organised, could see how the support it was receiving would manifest in an electoral contest. Roscommon itself was not considered a Sinn Féin stronghold, a fact that led to an influx of advanced nationalist supporters and organisers from surrounding regions in the run-up to polling day.<sup>1</sup>

Sinn Féin, though certainly in large part responsible for the shape of the advanced nationalist campaign, did not actually propose a member as a candidate. George Noble, Count Plunkett, father of the executed Easter Rising participant Joseph Plunkett, agreed to enter the election on an independent basis after being approached by a number of individuals who believed that his bereavement, among other attributes, would have provided him with a large degree of sympathetic support in the contest. Exceptionally important to any electoral contest in Ireland at the time was clerical support and for the Count this came most prominently from Fr. Michael O’Flanagan, a Roscommon-based curate who associated with Sinn Féin at the highest levels. O’Flanagan’s enthusiasm and desire to avoid a divisive contest saw him engage with IPP supporters, most prominently J.P. Hayden, MP for South Roscommon, whom he asked to support Plunkett. Hayden, a strong supporter of the IPP leader John Redmond, knocked back the priest’s naïve request and instead went about trying to organise the opposition.<sup>2</sup>

Greater political experience did row in behind the cause in the form of another local MP, Laurence Ginnell, the irrepressible representative for North Westmeath.<sup>3</sup> Ginnell had met with another candidate, *Roscommon Herald* owner Jasper Tully, who had previously assisted the MP in gaining the North Westmeath seat. Ginnell was however unable to support Tully’s policies, something that greatly annoyed Tully and was ‘extremely painful’ for Ginnell.<sup>4</sup> The efforts O’Flanagan and Ginnell (who on one occasion walked for four hours through snow-covered roads to reach a rally), allied with those of grass roots activists, ensured Plunkett’s election.<sup>5</sup> The Count, who arrived in Roscommon just two days before the polls opened, did so fortunately, as pithily noted by Michael Laffan, ‘...too late...to do any damage to his own cause’.<sup>6</sup> He defeated both Tully and the IPP candidate, Thomas J. Devine (referred to in Dublin weekly *The Leader* as an: “I say ditto” automaton’ and a ‘cypher’), quite comprehensively, doubling second-placed Devine’s vote.<sup>7</sup> After the election Plunkett agreed to Sinn Féin demands that he not take his seat at Westminster, yet, annoyingly for Arthur Griffith, the Sinn Féin founder, the Count also set about outlining his own individual vision for advanced nationalism in Ireland, something that saw the two men come into conflict.<sup>8</sup> *The Irish Independent* reported that the

1 Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) County Inspector’s Report, Roscommon, January 1917, CO/904/102.

2 *Westmeath Independent*, 27 January 1917.

3 Denis Carroll, *They have fooled you again – Michael O’Flanagan (1876-1942): Priest, Republican, Social Critic* (Dublin, Columba Press, 1993), p.55.

4 Military Archive (MA), Bureau of Military History Witness Statement (BMHWS) No. 982, Mrs. Alice Ginnell, pp. 14-15

5 *The Leader*, 17 Feb. 1917.

6 Michael Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland – The Sinn Féin Party, 1916-1923* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.84.

7 *The Leader*, 3 February 1917; *Westmeath Independent*, 10 February 1917.

8 Laffan, *Resurrection of Sinn Féin*, pp.103-106.

victory saw celebratory processions in numerous midlands towns, as a great number of former IPP individuals registered their delight at the result.<sup>9</sup>

The reasons for the Count's comprehensive victory are varied. The movement of younger voters to Sinn Féin was a massive factor, even though the three-and-a-half year old electoral register (rendered so by the prolongation of the war in Europe) meant that many who could have voted, having reached the requisite age, were unable to do so.<sup>10</sup> Historians, and indeed contemporary political observers, believe that younger men put pressure on their elders to vote Sinn Féin, something that appears quite certain. The Roscommon Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) County Inspector opined that many young men had become Sinn Féin members around the time of the election, disillusioned as they were by the pro-British Army enlistment IPP and its grass roots affiliates.<sup>11</sup> Historian Charles Townshend, among others, believes that the IPP had not taken the challenge seriously, and that the loss came as a great surprise.<sup>12</sup> *The Leader* noted that the election was a 'rap on the knuckles' for the IPP, making it clear that the fact the party 'got one in the eye' should have motivated them for future contests.<sup>13</sup> However, Michael McDermott-Hayes, editor of the *Westmeath Independent* believed that the move to Sinn Féin was on such a scale that the IPP was already fighting a losing battle.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, IPP leader John Redmond's reaction to the result appeared to indicate that he too saw far more comprehensive losses on the political horizon, as a despairing fatalism began to creep into his dealings with party colleagues.<sup>15</sup>

### South Longford by-election

In the aftermath of the Roscommon victory, punitive government actions implemented under the Defence of the Realm Act continued to stoke the Sinn Féin fire. Rather simple, yet highly symbolic acts such as a prohibition on St. Patrick's Day parades allied with the continued imprisonment of many Sinn Féin members provided the party with emotive causes from which they generated support.<sup>16</sup> The victory in Roscommon had provided advanced nationalism with a degree of gravitas and credibility previously lacking, and those unsure about the substance of the movement began to take it more seriously and treat with it more frequently. By the time of the May by-election in South Longford, it appeared certain that the IPP was to have a serious contender to deal with in a constituency which it had held without challenge for a quarter of a century.

9 *Irish Independent*, 7 February 1917; *Irish Independent*, 12 February 1917; *Westmeath Independent*, 17 February 1917.

10 *Westmeath Independent*, 10 February 1917.

11 RIC County Inspector's Report, Roscommon, February 1917, CO/904/102.

12 Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (London, Penguin, 2006), p.328.

13 *The Leader*, 10 February 1917; *The Leader*, 3 March 1917.

14 *Westmeath Independent*, 24 March 1917.

15 Joseph P. Finnan, *John Redmond and Irish Unity: 1912-1918* (New York, Syracuse University Press, 2004), p.212.

16 RIC County Inspector's Report, Westmeath, March 1917, CO/904/102; *Irish Times*, 19 March 1917; *The Leader*, 24 March 1917; *Westmeath Independent*, 24 March 1917.

The party's candidate was Roscommon man Joe McGuinness, a recently arrested and still-interned party member, who, it must be noted, was less than enthused by the prospect.<sup>17</sup> His belief in the probable failure of the attempt to elect him, and his inability to canvass meant that it was up to supporters to promote his case and many of those who had assisted Count Plunkett did the same for McGuinness. Laurence Ginnell and Arthur Griffith led the vanguard, as the catchy slogan 'Put him in to get him out' adorned Sinn Féin election literature. Six thousand copies of an article by the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Walsh, from the *Evening Herald* which outlined how IPP policies were ruining the country were printed by Athlone Printing Works owner Thomas Chapman free of charge and distributed widely.<sup>18</sup> This type of support, allied with positive coverage in the *Westmeath Independent*, also an Athlone Printing Works production, ensured that Sinn Féin's support in the region was significantly bolstered.<sup>19</sup>

The ability of Sinn Féin to gain the votes of the young men of the county, the ability of many of those young men to influence their elders' vote and the support of younger Roman Catholic clergymen helped ensure McGuinness's victory.<sup>20</sup> The undoubtedly powerful influence of the Archbishop's letter was such that the *Leader* suggested that 'to a certain extent, [it may] be put down as the Archbishop of Dublin's election.'<sup>21</sup> McGuinness's win over the IPP man Patrick McKenna, an activist of long standing in Westmeath, though exceptionally close (the margin was just 37 votes), showed that Plunkett's victory was not an aberration and appeared to pave the way for additional Sinn Féin gains all over Ireland.<sup>22</sup> Accusations of intimidation, personation and interference with ballot boxes were made, yet, as was pointed out, the out-of-date electoral register had given the IPP an advantage, despite which the party lost the election.

The election result also highlighted how out of touch the IPP had become with its grass roots organisations in the region. For example, in Athlone, John Dillon, the IPP's second in command, believed Longford's constitutional nationalists had a robust and influential body of supporters.<sup>23</sup> Greater familiarity with the vitality of constitutional nationalism in Athlone would have led him to reassess this opinion. Dean Kelly, the IPP's strongest supporter and Dillon's local contact, was no longer present; his 51 year career had taken its toll and he had retired to Cork, where he died in mid-June.<sup>24</sup> His pre-eminent role in Athlone's political life, spanning almost

17 Marie Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish Revolution: 1910-1923* (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2003), pp.49-50

18 Coleman, Longford, p.62.

19 *Westmeath Independent*, 5 May 1917.

20 James McConnel, 'The franchise factor in the defeat of the Irish Parliamentary Party, 1885-1918', in *The Historical Journal*, 47, 2 (2004), p.368; *Westmeath Independent*, 12 May 1917; *Westmeath Independent*, 19 May 1917; RIC County Inspector's Report, Longford, May 1917, CO/904/102.

21 *The Leader*, 19 May 1917.

22 *Westmeath Independent*, 12 May 1917; For a detailed account of the by-election see Coleman, *Longford*, pp.45-67.

23 Patrick Maume, *The Long Gestation: Irish Nationalist Life 1891-1918* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1999), p. 196.

24 *Irish Independent*, 21 June 1917; *Westmeath Examiner*, 23 June 1917.

thirty years, ensured that a replacement of equal standing to direct local activists was difficult to find. No such replacement was found, although a small number of IPP supporters from Athlone were involved in McKenna's campaign. This involvement was sometimes violent, though ultimately ineffective. Athlone was to the fore in celebrating McGuinness's victory, especially its working class areas, where republican flags were raised and republican songs heard.<sup>25</sup> The *Westmeath Independent*, echoing the opinions printed in numerous contemporary publications, noted that the result was a harbinger of the IPP's political doom, especially given that a new electoral register was to be in place by the time of the next general election:

On a new register, which embraces the young manhood of Ireland...nothing is surer than the...prophecy...that with few exceptions, the Members of the Irish Party would be defeated at the next general election.<sup>26</sup>

As the months passed and the general election neared, a number of other events assisted Sinn Féin in augmenting its support base. IPP inactivity was recognised by officials in Dublin Castle, who stated that 'it is manifest that the...[IPP] has lost its dominating power in the country and is making no serious effort to regain it'.<sup>27</sup> The victorious campaign of Eamon de Valera in the East Clare by-election during the summer was able to capitalise on growing disorder in Ireland as the deeply unpopular threat of army conscription hung over the populace.<sup>28</sup> Laurence Ginnell agreed to abstain from Westminster, and became a full and very vocal Sinn Féin member by early July.<sup>29</sup> Sinn Féin began to advertise their main objectives widely: abstention from Westminster, representation at the Peace Conference (to be convened to deal with the political repercussions of the First World War) and complete independence from Britain. The establishment of the Irish Convention in June 1917, a British ploy designed to mollify new war ally America, was seen as an impotent gesture towards solving the Irish crisis – Sinn Féin refused to participate with the southern representatives of the increasingly strong Labour Party also demurring.<sup>30</sup> Laurence Ginnell stated that if the 'men of Lewes' (the prison where many Sinn Féin members were held), were not represented, the Convention was nothing more than a 'fraud and deception', a phrase which could also be applied to the bogus German Plot which was dreamed up by the British authorities in an attempt to smear republicans.<sup>31</sup> The death of hunger-striker Thomas Ashe in September ensured that Sinn Féin had

25 *Irish Independent*, 12 May 1917; *Westmeath Independent*, 12 May 1917; RIC County Inspector's Report, Westmeath, May 1917, CO/904/102; RIC County Inspector's Report, Roscommon, May 1917, CO/904/102.

26 *Westmeath Independent*, 12 May 1917.

27 RIC Inspector General's Report, June 1917, CO/904/103.

28 RIC Inspector General's Report, June 1917, CO/904/103.

29 House of Commons Parliamentary Papers (HCPP), Documents relative to the Sinn Féin movement, [Cmd. 1108], p.32; *Westmeath Independent*, 7 July 1917.

30 Peter Collins, 'Irish Labour and politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', in Peter Collins (ed.), *Nationalism and Unionism: Conflict in Ireland, 1885-1921* (Belfast, Queen's University Belfast, 1994), p.142.

31 Hansard 5 Commons, lxxxxiii, 2029 (21 May 1917).

a martyr for their cause, and thousands flocked to join the party which continued to decry the malignancy of British rule in Ireland.<sup>32</sup>

Early 1918 saw anti-IPP sentiment grow further. Distinctions began to be drawn in some quarters between MIPs and MEPs, Members of the Irish Parliament and Members of the English Parliament; the former ‘scorn to touch the English bribe’ of £400.<sup>33</sup> In quite stark terms the *Westmeath Independent* wrote of the failure of the IPP:

...[the] sham constitutional movement prosecuted since the death of Parnell...governed and dictated by English Liberals was...bleeding Ireland to death. [The IPP] was...politically and morally atrophied when Sinn Féin stepped in...Our National life was drugged, and while we remained politically insensible the Irish question had dropped back to the treacherous days of Keogh and Sadlier.<sup>34</sup>

The government’s efforts to quell the unrest did little to persuade people to change their voting patterns and in southern counties Sinn Féin continued to poll well in by-elections. Dr. Patrick McCartan took a King’s County seat for the party in the spring of 1918, with local press support for his candidacy leading to the forced and highly unpopular closure of the Athlone Printing Works, which printed the *Tullamore and King’s County Advertiser*.<sup>35</sup> More direct efforts to subdue Sinn Féin support did elicit results, with reports on victory celebrations for Arthur Griffith’s East Cavan by-election conveying a muted atmosphere, while there was an absence of Sinn Féin meetings in Westmeath in late summer.<sup>36</sup> However, the ever present threat of conscription ensured that high support for Sinn Féin policies remained. Indeed the unpopularity of the protracted threat had ensured that even when the IPP became more vocal in opposition to it they were seen as doing little other than adopting a Sinn Féin line. By the time of the First World War armistice in November it was evident that the IPP had been greatly undermined by their support for the war, and by allowing their grass roots machinery to become disorganised, disparate and ineffective; as the Inspector General noted in October 1918 the party had ‘manifestly lost its dominating influence over the electorate’<sup>37</sup>

### The 1918 General Election

The destruction of the IPP’s electoral dominance of the previous twenty years was to ensure that the December 1918 general election was to be the most volatile

32 Seán McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922: Theatres of War* (Oxon, Routledge, 2005), pp.610-619.

33 *Westmeath Independent*, 22 September 1917; *Westmeath Independent*, 13 October 1917.

34 *Westmeath Independent*, 5 January 1918.

35 *Westmeath Independent*, 30 March 1918.

36 *Irish Independent*, 24 June 1918; *Westmeath Independent*, 29 June 1918; RIC County Inspector’s Report, Westmeath, July 1918, CO/904/106; RIC County Inspector’s Report, Westmeath, August 1918, CO/904/106.

37 RIC Inspector General’s Report, October 1918, CO/904/107.

staged in the country since the nineteenth century. A greatly expanded franchise (now two million, more than twice that of 1910), the redefinition of some constituency boundaries, the continued suppressive activities of the government, and many other factors, all fed the sense of excitement. In the midlands, two of the most interesting contests were staged in the neighbouring constituencies of Westmeath (an amalgamation of the two constituencies of North and South Westmeath) and South Roscommon.

### The Candidates

Voters unfamiliar with Sir Walter Nugent, MP for South Westmeath since 1907 and Laurence Ginnell MP for North Westmeath since 1900, might have envisaged a keen contest between these two for the Westmeath county seat. However, it appeared certain, even in the months before the election, that Nugent's view of Ireland's role in the Empire had alienated all but a tiny minority:

[Nugent] does not think it worth his while retiring from South Westmeath seeing that the people will in the near future release him... We have heard of the man falling between two stools, but the member for Westmeath does not even allow himself that slender chance. He is now as much on the outside of the Irish Party... as... Sinn Féin... He has left himself no support to grip.<sup>38</sup>

Nugent had never energetically opposed conscription, much to the annoyance of his constituents and, indeed, many IPP members; he firmly believed that Ireland's place was within the British Empire and that its citizens should have fought the imperial fight. There were rumours that he was to submit to the inevitable and withdraw, given the groundswell against him, but Nugent ignored the prevailing opinion and signalled his intention to fight as an independent candidate.<sup>39</sup> Many of his IPP counterparts bowed out more gracefully. Thirty-two IPP MPs did not seek re-election, gifting, as the RIC put it, Sinn Féin with at least twenty-five seats. The latter party had put forward 102 candidates for the 105 available seats. Many were chosen, according to the police, 'on account of their rebel antecedents.'<sup>40</sup>

Laurence Ginnell, the second of three candidates in the Westmeath constituency, relied only on his own political record, rather than that of deceased relatives, to recommend his candidacy. The 64-year-old barrister, whose political career had to this point been that of an outsider, was the obvious choice for Sinn Féin, though he, in common with a number of other candidates, was in Reading prison during the campaign.<sup>41</sup> The final candidate was P.J. Weymes, a Westmeath County Councillor whose considerable business interests made him a natural choice for the IPP.<sup>42</sup>

38 *Westmeath Independent*, 27 July 1918.

39 *Westmeath Independent*, 28 September 1918.

40 Inspector General's Report, November 1918, CO/904/107.

41 BMHWS No. 982, Mrs. Alice Ginnell, p.20; *Irish Independent*, 3 September 1918

42 *Westmeath Examiner*, 23 November 1918; *Westmeath Examiner*, 30 November 1918; *Westmeath Independent*, 30 November 1918.

South Roscommon's ballot paper was more straightforward as just two candidates contested the seat. The incumbent J.P. Hayden, owner of the *Westmeath Examiner* and *Roscommon Messenger* had to fight the first ever contest in his twenty-one year career as MP against Dublin tailor Harry Boland, a prominent republican and a man with Roscommon heritage.<sup>43</sup>

### The Contests

While both constituencies witnessed energetic contests, it is without doubt that the more vigorous of the two was held in South Roscommon. From the start of campaigning J.P. Hayden went on the offensive, using the *Roscommon Messenger* to promote his cause and blacken Sinn Féin.<sup>44</sup> As early as September he accused Galway Sinn Féiners of burning the American flag and their Cork brethren of insulting American soldiers and sailors.<sup>45</sup> He alleged that parliamentary abstention was 'absolute folly' and would result only in additional taxation, as the government railroaded measures through in the absence of Irish opposition.<sup>46</sup> Hayden invoked, probably inadvisedly, the 'old' party achievements and policies, stating that he had spent as much time in jail as many of his political opponents, who used their internment as evidence of the sacrifices they were making for Ireland.<sup>47</sup> At numerous meetings Hayden was shouted down (in at least one case missiles were thrown) by Boland's supporters and in Athlone, where the *Roscommon Messenger* believed he was well supported, IPP canvassers had their houses tarred and in one case a Sinn Féin flag was painted on the wall of a prominent Hayden supporter's house.<sup>48</sup> Though Hayden believed, possibly incorrectly, that he had the support of most of the priests in the constituency, 'calumny and vituperation [and] false charges regarding religion' entered the fray and damaged his campaign.<sup>49</sup> He did gain some support in poorer rural areas of the constituency, though mostly he gained the backing of wealthier men who had benefitted under the IPP during the previous two decades, '[those] with something to lose, and who were keen to protect what they held.'<sup>50</sup>

Boland's campaign was equally vigorous. The absence of his own newspaper proved no handicap as both the *Roscommon Herald* and *Westmeath Independent* gave support. McDermott-Hayes published eye-catching 'VOTE FOR IRELAND'

43 David Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland's Irish Revolution* (Cork, Cork University Press, 2003), p.109.

44 *Irish Independent*, 30 November 1918; *Connaught Tribune*, 7 December 1918; *Irish Independent*, 11 December 1918.

45 *Irish Independent*, 26 September 1918.

46 *Irish Independent*, 29 November 1918.

47 *Irish Independent*, 4 December 1918; Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland's Irish Revolution*, p.111; Jim Maher, *Harry Boland, A Biography* (Cork, Mercier Press, 1998), p.70.

48 *Irish Independent*, 2 December 1918; *Anglo Celt*, 7 December 1918; *Roscommon Messenger*, 7 December 1918.

49 *Irish Independent*, 11 December 1918; Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland's Irish Revolution*, p.110.

50 Fergus Campbell, 'The social dynamics of nationalist politics in the west of Ireland 1898-1918', in *Past and Present*, 182 (February, 2004), p.195.

banners promoting not only Boland, but most of the midlands' Sinn Féin candidates.<sup>51</sup> He editorialised that it would be 'a foul crime against Ireland,' to vote for the IPP, whose adoption of aspects of their opponents' manifesto was viewed as confirmation of their inconsequence.<sup>52</sup> Boland himself spoke in Athlone after a loosening of the prohibition on rallies, stating his and his party's priorities: 'We are not promising you better labour conditions or better houses or better money for the farmers' produce. We promise you an independent Irish nation.'<sup>53</sup> He was fighting the election, as David Fitzpatrick has put it, 'as an outsider preoccupied with national issues rather than local loyalties'.<sup>54</sup> Boland distanced Sinn Féin from the Germans, decried the suggestion of partitioning Ireland and lambasted the IPP, though, quite adroitly, did not explicitly state how his party intended to achieve Irish independence.

The Westmeath contest was less combative. Meetings were held to promote Laurence Ginnell who had to rely on his wife and supporters to speak and canvas on his behalf. The indefatigable Fr. O'Flanagan ensured there was much publicity surrounding the upcoming polls, with one of his meetings in Athlone seeing quite a degree of enmity between locals and army men.<sup>55</sup> The *Irish Independent* reported that a 'rush' was made at soldiers, who returned to the barracks so as to avoid a more serious confrontation.<sup>56</sup> O'Flanagan described the impotency of the IPP at Westminster; John Dillon, their leader, he stated, was speaking to 'empty benches'.<sup>57</sup> P.J. Weymes was criticised for his alleged support for conscription and while he vigorously disputed the claim, the emotive nature of the term, and the ability to tarnish the reputation of those supposedly supportive of the measure, proved useful in damaging his campaign.<sup>58</sup>

Despite his incarceration Ginnell made efforts to impart his opinions to constituents; indeed his warders believed that, 'he is making every effort to direct the... campaign from the prison'.<sup>59</sup> In a letter to Harry Boland, published in expurgated form, Ginnell (who for the benefit of the prison governor signed off 'Yours in the unconquerable cause, Laurence Ginnell, Poisonous Insect'), stated his opposition to any contest on the grounds of its 'factious' nature and in a second epistle stated that he no longer wanted Irish independence viewed as a 'domestic' British issue, but as an Irish issue alone.<sup>60</sup> Neither Weymes (whose centre of support was Mullingar), nor Walter Nugent presented addresses in Athlone. The latter did canvass, but met

51 *Westmeath Independent*, 30 November 1918.

52 *Westmeath Independent*, 14 December 1918.

53 *Irish Independent*, 25 November 1918; Maher, Harry Boland, p. 69.

54 Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland's Irish Revolution*, p.109.

55 *Irish Independent*, 3 December 1918; *Anglo Celt*, 7 December 1918; *Irish Independent*, 11 December 1918; BMHWS No. 982, Mrs. Alice Ginnell, p. 21; 'Postal Censorship', 5 December 1918, *Westmeath Independent*, CO 904/166, pp.379-380.

56 *Irish Independent*, 3 December 1918; *Irish Times*, 3 December 1918; *Westmeath Independent*, 7 December 1918.

57 *Irish Independent*, 3 December 1918.

58 *Irish Independent*, 2 December 1918; *Westmeath Independent*, 7 December 1918; *Anglo Celt*, 7 December 1918; *Anglo Celt*, 14 December 1918.

59 'Postal Censorship', November 1918, CO 904/164, p.728.

60 'Postal Censorship', Laurence Ginnell to 6, Harcourt St. (Sinn Féin offices), 18 November 1918, CO 904/164, p.978; 'Postal Censorship', November 1918, CO 904/164, p.729.

with hostility that probably dissuaded him from attempting a large-scale public speech.<sup>61</sup> The baronet's manifesto promoted a solution to the Irish problem: '... on the lines accepted by O'Connell, Parnell and John Redmond...namely Home Rule for Ireland inside the Empire'. He opposed partition and wished, tellingly, to protect the interests of 'the farmers of Great Britain and Ireland'. He stated that his move away from the IPP was precipitated by disagreements 'with them on some issues of National Importance'.<sup>62</sup> The *Meath Chronicle* questioned the invocation of Parnell's name by Nugent, quoting the dead leader's desire to destroy 'the last link which keeps Ireland bound to England'. It went further to state that Ginnell was the only IPP member that had actually followed Parnell's policy and was 'the best hated man in England'.<sup>63</sup>

The *Westmeath Examiner* gave much support to Nugent, repeatedly printing his manifesto, though it pushed Weymes' candidacy more prominently. Its editorials during the run up to the election portrayed the IPP as having gained much for Ireland's farmers, associated Sinn Féin with 'Kaiserism' and questioned the abstentionist policy, asking whether Ireland wished to be represented 'from the most prominent platform in the Universe', Westminster, by Edward Carson the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party.<sup>64</sup> The *Westmeath Independent's* support for Ginnell was whole-hearted and while it did publish Nugent's and Weymes' manifestos, its editorials left readers in no doubt as to where their duties lay.

On polling day, 14 December 1918, it quickly became clear that Sinn Féin's support greatly outweighed that of the IPP. Both Ginnell and Boland gained seats as the constituencies' voters overwhelmingly backed them both. In Westmeath and South Roscommon more than two-thirds of the votes registered were for Sinn Féin.<sup>65</sup> In South Roscommon, Boland won by polling more than twice Hayden's total, with Ginnell's victory even more emphatic (some voters reportedly did not even know his name, but went to vote 'for the man in jail'). His total votes was 12,345, almost four times that of his nearest rival, P. J. Weymes. Walter Nugent received a paltry 603 votes,<sup>66</sup> the lowest of any incumbent MP who contested his seat in the 1918 election.<sup>67</sup> His abject failure was reported upon gleefully by *The*

61 'Postal Censorship', James King to Laurence Ginnell, 17 November 1918, CO 904/164, p.979; 'Postal Censorship', Alice Ginnell to Laurence Ginnell, 23 November 1918 CO 904/164, p.981; *Anglo Celt*, 14 December 1918; *Westmeath Independent*, 30 November 1918; *Westmeath Independent*, 12 December 1918.

62 *Westmeath Examiner*, 23 November 1918; *Irish Independent*, 23 November 1918; *Westmeath Examiner*, 30 November 1918; *Westmeath Examiner*, 7 December 1918; *Westmeath Examiner*, 14 December 1918.

63 *Meath Chronicle*, 14 December 1918.

64 *Westmeath Examiner*, 23 November 1918.

65 Laffan, *Resurrection of Ireland*, p.167.

66 *Westmeath Independent* 21 December 1918; *Westmeath Independent*, 4 January. 1919. The Roscommon results were: Boland 10,685; Hayden 4,233. The Westmeath results were: Ginnell 12,435; Weymes 3,458; Nugent 603 (Brian M. Walker (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland 1801–1922* (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 1978), pp.396; 398).

67 Lower totals were seen in Dublin and the six northern counties where peripheral candidates stood for little other reason than to be represented on the ballot (Walker, *Election Results*, pp.388-398).

*Leader*, which recommended that the baronet ‘go home and stay there’.<sup>68</sup> Though it has been traditionally written that the IPP gained their best support in urban areas amongst older voters, it appears, if local contemporary estimates can be relied upon, that in the case of the Westmeath seat, their support in Athlone collapsed spectacularly. The *Westmeath Independent* reported that almost 750 from 800 votes cast favoured Ginnell, who, after the result was released, wrote to President Wilson in the USA requesting that he assist Ireland at the Peace Conference.<sup>69</sup> A letter of congratulations sent to Ginnell from Lorcan Robbins, a former IPP activist, noted: ‘The swing of S. Westmeath to the Republican astonished even the most optimistic amongst us’.<sup>70</sup> In the case of the north of the county, support for Sinn Féin was less impressive, with Mullingar singled out for opprobrium by Ginnell himself.<sup>71</sup> Reports suggest that the MP’s status as a shoo-in led to the polls on the east of Athlone being relatively quiescent. Thomas Chapman who carried out much promotion for Ginnell, noted that the poll for the Westmeath man would have been higher ‘were it not that in every part of the county your return was felt to be assured.’<sup>72</sup> Polling stations on the west of the town saw greater activity given that Hayden’s political reputation had not suffered the same degree of self-sabotage exhibited by Nugent.<sup>73</sup>

Historians have attempted to deconstruct the election of December 1918; the results were clear; how they were arrived at was somewhat less so. Factors contributing to the Sinn Féin victory, apart from the aforementioned increased electorate, included the decision of ‘organised Labour’ not to run candidates. The largest Labour-affiliated body in Athlone, the Athlone Trades Council, had made its neutrality clear and told people to vote as they pleased, thus keeping the main focus of independence to the fore.<sup>74</sup> Another powerful influence on the election campaign was the activities of the local Irish Volunteers, basically the military wing of Sinn Féin. Its members checked registers, canvassed, collected funds and, perhaps the most pro-actively, provided transport and protection for the Sinn Féin supporters.<sup>75</sup> It is also certain that they assisted in the promotion of personation at the polls, with one member, Patrick Lennon, stating that: ‘We voted for everyone who was on the register, who was dead or who had left the district, as well as several who were alive also.’<sup>76</sup> The occurrence of the debilitating Spanish Flu may have led some voters to pass their card on to a healthier contemporary; the prevalence

68 *The Leader*, 4 January 1919.

69 *Westmeath Independent*, 21 December 1918; ‘Postal Censorship’, Thomas Chapman to Seán O’Hurley, 17 December 1918, CO 904/164, p.1028; ‘Postal Censorship’, Laurence Ginnell to Doctor Wilson, President of the United States of America, 16 December 1918, CO 904/164, p.1027.

70 ‘Postal Censorship’, Lorcan Robbins to L. Ginnell 4 February 1919, CO 904/164, p.1183.

71 ‘Postal Censorship’, Laurence Ginnell to Alice Ginnell, 5 February 1919, CO 904/164, p.1184.

72 ‘Postal Censorship’, Laurence Ginnell (nephew) to Laurence Ginnell, 17 November 1918, CO 904/164, p.979; ‘Postal Censorship’, Thomas Chapman to L. Ginnell, 11 January 1919, CO 904/164, p.1076.

73 *Westmeath Independent*, 21 December 1918.

74 *Westmeath Independent*, 14 December 1918.

75 BMHWS No. 1,296, Thomas Costello, p.4; BMHWS No. 1,336, Patrick Lennon p.3.

76 BMHWS No. 1,336, Patrick Lennon, p.3.

of the virus in Athlone (early December saw 300 people diagnosed; with fourteen fatalities<sup>77</sup>), was recognised as a difficulty in the South Roscommon constituency, though it still realised a 69 percent turn out.<sup>78</sup> Of course it would be unrealistic to suggest that personation was largely responsible for the margins of victory seen in either Westmeath or Roscommon, though it certainly contributed.

Many historians cite Irish Volunteers' physical intimidation of the electorate as a prominent feature of the election, though this does not appear to have been manifested to any great extent in either constituency. Indeed, local Volunteer Seamus O'Meara stated that they actually provided protection from such intimidation by the opposition, as the 'RIC...showed their hostility and blindly allowed disorderly conduct on behalf of the Nationalist Party.'<sup>79</sup> Without doubt there were people who feared the new party's canvassers and canvassing methods, such as local Protestant farmer Cecilia Daniels who stated that Sinn Féin supporters, 'the Catholic Clergy, strangers, adventurers and boys and girls' were, at least to her mind, generally intimidating.<sup>80</sup> Former Athlone resident Patrick Shea, whose father was an R.I.C. member, cited the activities 'of the young men in trench coats who were on the move,' with many historians similarly convinced of the efficacy of the Volunteers' methods of 'persuading' members of the local electorate to vote for Sinn Féin.<sup>81</sup> In counterpoint, it may have been the comprehensive nature of the canvassing campaign, probably the largest ever experienced locally, which intimidated some voters. James King, a former IPP figurehead in Westmeath, communicated to Ginnell that the canvassing was carried out with a vigorous professionalism:

Words cannot express the enthusiasm of...the young of both sexes; the ladies were marvels of electioneering skill and a various stages...I felt constrained to admit (to myself of course) that I and others of some experience in election work, were only handymen, while they were tradesmen.<sup>82</sup>

It is certain that, as historian Joseph Lee states, 'Sinn Féin won, in short, because of overwhelming support for its policy in southern Ireland.'<sup>83</sup> Indeed, even J.P. Hayden's *Roscommon Messenger* stated that polling day went off almost without incident, with its owner, exhibiting graciousness in defeat, describing how the Sinn Féin victory had seen the 'passing away of a great movement to be replaced by another'.<sup>84</sup>

77 *Irish Independent*, 2 December 1918; *Irish Independent*, 6 December 1918; *Irish Independent*, 7 December 1918; *Irish Times*, 7 December 1918.

78 Maher, *Harry Boland*, p. 70.

79 BMHWS No. 1,504, Seamus O'Meara, p.14.

80 Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), T/2782/29 Cecilia H. Daniels to Mrs. Flett, Australia, 21 September 1918; T/2782/31 Cecilia H. Daniels to Mrs. Flett, Australia, 3 December 1918.

81 Patrick Shea, *Voices and the Sound of Drums: An Irish Autobiography* (Belfast, Blackstaff Press, 1981), p.24.

82 James King to Laurence Ginnell, December 1918, CO 904/164, p.1027.

83 Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society: 1848-1918* (Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1973), p.161.

84 *Roscommon Messenger*, 21 December 1918; Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland's Irish Revolution*, p.112.

### 1920 local elections

As already mentioned, a comprehensive change in the Irish political scene required not only massive change at national level, but also a seismic shift in the constitution of the numerous local government bodies all over the country. In January 1920 the first local authority elections held since the First World War commenced were of interest on a number of fronts. It was certain that the political makeup of Urban and Rural District Councils was to be radically different; however, unlike during the 1918 general election, Sinn Féin was not to have a clear run in most constituencies. Similarly the County Councils, as well as the Poor Law Guardians' (PLG) summer contests were to present a more varied ticket to the electorate. The Labour Party was to compete, with the still numerous and influential former supporters of the IPP more than capable of concentrating their voting strength and claiming seats. Increases in the electorate ensured greater participation, while the introduction of proportional representation similarly guaranteed a less predictable outcome.<sup>85</sup> The *Westmeath Independent* believed the January election to be a 'golden opportunity' to fight 'economic oppression' and deliver a verdict on the Government of Ireland Bill, Britain's latest half-effort aimed at solving the Irish problem; 'a sham...trotted out late in the day to quell...American hostility'.<sup>86</sup> The newspaper, along with many others in the midlands pushed for a Sinn Féin vote: 'Their programme...should commend itself to every ratepayer who has his own and the country's welfare at heart'.<sup>87</sup> Athlone town, centred at the southern end of Roscommon and Westmeath acted as a theatre for contests for numerous local authority bodies, and a concise account of experiences there will help illustrate the complexity of the local political scene in provincial Ireland.

As noted for the 1918 election, the decision of the Labour Party not to enter the fray may have assisted Sinn Féin with its comprehensive victory, especially in urban areas such as Athlone. However, many historians believe that even if the party had joined that contest, its chances of gaining a significant number of seats were negligible. The reason for this view is that the party was, in the main, still quite disorganised. In the case of Athlone, the main Labour union, James Larkin's Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), did not establish an official presence until October 1919, and while it was preceded by the Athlone Trades Council, the localised, unconnected nature of the Labour movement was a difficulty.<sup>88</sup> Upon its formation, the Athlone ITGWU was able to boast a membership of almost 600, making it the largest in the midlands, one of a number of now interconnected branches, regulated by a central committee.<sup>89</sup>

For the purposes of electioneering, having a solid organisational structure helped the Labour movement. However, it was obvious that many Labour supporters in Athlone also supported Sinn Féin. Perhaps the most prominent Irish Volunteer and Sinn Féin member in Athlone, a Cork man Seán O'Hurley, believed

85 *Westmeath Independent*, 1 November 1919.

86 *Westmeath Independent*, 3 January 1920.

87 *Westmeath Independent*, 10 January 1920.

88 National Library of Ireland (NLI), MS 7282, ITGWU, List of Branches in Chronological Order.

89 NLI, ITGWU, List of Branches.

Labour was ‘one of the strongest forces in Irish Nationalism’, a view shared by many contemporaries.<sup>90</sup> The local press recognised the membership and loyalty overlap at a large Labour pre-election meeting, which tellingly saw no attack on Sinn Féin candidates or policies. The suppression of Sinn Féin by the government and consequential small scale canvassing (as opposed to Labour, which had an active ITGWU body of promoters), meant that Sinn Féin had to ‘rely on the discretion of the voters’, to delineate between the respective candidates.<sup>91</sup> So as to not alienate the followers of either camp, the Westmeath Independent told people to take advantage of the new system and ‘vote for both’.<sup>92</sup>

Logically, the holding of dual membership implied compatibility between the two organisations’ aims. The issues that Sinn Féin intended to tackle in Athlone had much in common with those in which Labour was interested. Sinn Féin’s drive for the promotion of Irish goods, increased access to technical education, building labourers’ houses, improved sanitation and lighting, the provision of a municipal library, amongst numerous other proposed measures, were easily accommodated within the Labour manifesto. Nationally, Sinn Féin’s programme had Labour-friendly aspects, and Labour’s grass roots were generally considered quite willing to support Dáil Éireann and embrace a republic. While their level of cooperation is difficult to pin down, it was not unusual for local agreements or accommodations between the two parties to be hammered out, something that was, at least to some extent, shown in Athlone.<sup>93</sup>

Polling day on 15 January 1920 saw a 75 percent turnout, slightly higher than the national average.<sup>94</sup> Results showed that on the west side of Athlone, one Sinn Féin, three Labour and five ‘Ratepayers’ Representatives’ candidates were returned, while one Sinn Féin, four Labour and four Independents gained seats on the east side.<sup>95</sup> A quick overview appears to confirm a sound Sinn Féin defeat and a good, if not comprehensive, Labour performance. Former supporters of the IPP, under the guise of Ratepayers’ Representatives, and independents, also appear to have made a solid showing, outpolling Sinn Féin. However, it is not so clear cut.

For example, in St. Mary’s ward two successful ‘Independent’ candidates, Michael Hogan and Patrick Henry, were proposed by people who performed the same service for Sinn Féin candidates. Henry (described as ‘a very advanced Sinn Féiner’ by the RIC), had himself proposed another Sinn Féin candidate.<sup>96</sup> The

90 *Westmeath Independent*, 8 March 1919; *Westmeath Independent*, 7 June 1919. See Francis Costello, ‘Labour, Irish republicanism, and the social order during the Anglo-Irish War’, in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 17, 2 (December, 1991), pp.1-22.

91 RIC County Inspector’s Report, Westmeath, January 1920, CO/904/111; *Westmeath Independent*, 10 January 1920; *Westmeath Independent*, 17 January 1920.

92 *Westmeath Independent*, 29 November 1919.

93 Arthur Mitchell, *Labour in Irish politics, 1890-1930; the Irish labour movement in an age of revolution* (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 1974), pp.122-123.

94 Arthur Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland: Dáil Éireann 1919-22* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1995), p.123.

95 *Westmeath Independent*, 10 January 1920; *Freeman’s Journal*, 17 January 1920; *Irish Independent*, 17 January 1920; *Irish Times*, 17 January 1920.

96 ‘Sinn Féin and Republican Suspects, 1899-1922’, Laurence Ginnell, CO 904/202/162, p.139; *Westmeath Independent*, 10 January 1920.

*Westmeath Independent* noted: ‘Other...members elected were also Sinn Féiners, but ...they went forward technically as ‘Independents’.’<sup>97</sup> Similar situations were seen elsewhere as Sinn Féin candidates acted with a degree of circumspection given the party’s proscription.<sup>98</sup> Labour’s strong result came on the back of securing pay rises for 600 Athlone Woollen Mills workers, and while there were individual rivalries, the press believed that Sinn Féin and Labour would work well together.<sup>99</sup> The high-profile Labour organ, the *Watchword of Labour*, stated that there was a ‘Red Flag over...Athlone’ amongst other midland towns, but decried the selection of J.J. Coen as chairman of the Urban Council two weeks later, given his links to the IPP.<sup>100</sup>

Later in the year the virtually contest-free County Council and District Council elections around Athlone provided a clearer picture of local politics in the region. The results saw Westmeath County Council dominated by Sinn Féin and Labour, with the *Irish Bulletin*, the republican information sheet founded by Laurence Ginnell, complicating the picture further by describing some of the Labour councillors as ‘Republican Labour’.<sup>101</sup> The Council quickly elected its first republican chairman and as a symbolic act (replicated in many councils), the 1916 Minute Book had the resolution condemning the Easter Rising excised and burned.<sup>102</sup> Athlone RDC1 (Westmeath) and RDC2 (Roscommon) were controlled by Sinn Féin, a situation which reflected Labour’s as still poor levels of rural support.<sup>103</sup> The Athlone PLG’s new chairman Seán O’Hurley reflected that soon to be disbanded body’s republican roster (all except two members were newly elected), with the co-option of a lady republican to the position of Vice-Chairman completed soon after the board convened.<sup>104</sup> After predicting a Sinn Féin sweep in the elections, Thomas Moles, MP for Belfast Ormeau, actually cited the Westmeath results as proof of the sectarian bias facilitated by the proportional representation system.<sup>105</sup> All of the bodies, following the lead taken by the UDC in May, declared their allegiance to Dáil Éireann.<sup>106</sup>

The election contests dealt with briefly in this article provide just a small taste of the turbulence experienced in Irish political life in the four years after the Easter Rising. The complexity of the period has ensured that with each passing year, new information is unearthed, new interpretations are attempted and importantly, the mosaic that is the history of the foundation of the Irish State is both expanded

97 *Westmeath Independent*, 24 January 1920.

98 Laffan, *Resurrection of Ireland*, p. 325.

99 *Watchword of Labour*, 20 December 1919; *The Watchword*, 17 January 1920; *Westmeath Independent*, 7 February 1920; Mitchell, *Labour*, p.123.

100 *The Watchword*, 24 January 1920; *The Watchword*, 31 January 1920.

101 *Irish Independent*, 3 June 1920; A.C., 5 June 1920; BMHWS No. 1,503, Michael McCormack, p. 20).

102 *Irish Independent*, 18 June 1920.

103 *Freeman’s Journal*, 8 June 1920; *Westmeath Independent*, 12 June 1920.

104 *Irish Times*, 8 June 1920; *Westmeath Independent*, 19 June 1920; *Westmeath Independent*, 3 July 1920; *Irish Bulletin*, 19 July 1920.

105 Hansard 5 Commons, cxxx, 1186-1187 (15 June 1920).

106 Minute Book of Athlone UDC, 5 May 1920; *Westmeath Independent*, 19 June 1920; *Westmeath Independent*, 17 July 1920.

and refined. It is certain that in the run up to the centenary year of 2016 many additional studies will contribute to this historically fascinating picture, a picture which, as this article shows, had quite a number of important midlands contributions which variously reflected national experiences, exhibited localised individuality or indeed, on occasion, set a trend. It is without doubt that the by-elections of North Roscommon and South Longford, the activities of Fr. Michael O’Flanagan and Laurence Ginnell, as well as those of newspapermen like Michael McDermott Hayes, all played an important role in defining the route that Irish political life took in the last years of the twentieth century’s second decade. It is to be hoped that further research into the role provincial Ireland played in forcing the agenda for change in the run up to the creation of the Irish Free State will be undertaken, and that it will help further to illustrate the importance of the midlands to the mosaic of Irish history.