

The War of Independence in Offaly

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Beginnings

The first company of Irish Volunteers in County Offaly was formed in Tullamore in November 1913 soon after its formation in the Rotunda in Dublin. Roger Casement and Tom Kettle were among those who spoke at recruiting meetings in Tullamore.¹ After the outbreak of World War 1 and the call by John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, for volunteers to enlist in the British Army, the Volunteer movement split. The majority sided with Redmond and only eleven thousand Volunteers nationwide sided with Eoin MacNeill and those that refused to heed Redmond's call. A similar schism occurred in Offaly and only about sixty of about 400 men in the Tullamore company sided with MacNeill. However these managed to hold on to whatever arms the company had in its possession at that time.²

In March 1916 a fundraising drive was organised for the Volunteers in Tullamore and a collection was taken up by members of Cumann na mBan. The day after the match while the proceeds were being checked and counted, a crowd, some waving miniature Union Jacks, attacked the hall and a mini-riot developed. One of the Volunteers fired a shot over the heads of the crowd and immediately after this several members of the RIC entered the hall intent on disarming the Volunteers. In the subsequent melee an RIC Sergeant was shot and wounded. The Volunteers managed to escape the mob but some were badly roughed up.³ This was one of the first incidents of bloodshed in the country and is an example of how, prior to 1916, the Irish Volunteer movement was far from universally supported in the country.

There was no activity in Offaly during the 1916 Rising due to Eoin MacNeill's countermanding order. A number of individual Volunteers did manage to get to Dublin and were active in the fighting during Easter Week. After the Rising was crushed the Volunteers in Offaly continued to drill and collect money for the purchase of arms. Some individual Volunteers or groups of Volunteers engaged in petty activity such as painting slogans and hanging up tricolours. One such incident in July 1917 led to the shooting and wounding of an RIC Sergeant while he was removing a tricolour from a tree.⁴

In 1918 the British Government decided to extend conscription to Ireland in an

1 BMH WS 1600 Patrick Boland

2 BMH WS 361 Peadar Bracken

3 BMH WS 48 Seamus Brennan

4 BMH WS 1688 Patrick Riordan

effort to replace the massive losses they were suffering on the Western Front.. All of Nationalist Ireland including the Catholic Church and the Irish Parliamentary Party were united in an effort to prevent the extension of the Conscription Act to Ireland. Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers were naturally at the forefront of the campaign and there was a deluge of new members in the Volunteers. Some companies which had previously had at most, two dozen members saw their numbers swell to over one hundred and fifty. The amount of arms available at this time was insignificant and most companies were lucky to have a few revolvers which invariably were carried by the officers, and the occasional Volunteer may have had possession of a shotgun. In May 1918 a general raid for arms was carried out on the houses of farmers and others known to possess arms. This effort mainly yielded shotguns and assorted ammunition.

As the Summer of 1918 passed the threat of conscription receded. This led to wholesale withdrawals from the Volunteers much to the chagrin of the more committed men. Most companies saw their numerical strength dwindle back to the levels they were at before the crisis started. The General Election of 1918 saw the Irish Volunteers play a major part in the Sinn Féin landslide. In Offaly the Sinn Féin candidate, Dr Pat Mac Cartan, was returned unopposed, so many of the Volunteers were free to assist in the campaigns of the Sinn Féin candidates in Westmeath and Laois.

Throughout 1919 and into the early part of 1920 the activities of the Volunteers continued on a relatively small scale. Organisers were sent from General Headquarters to assist the local commanders. Amongst these were men like Ernie O'Malley. As violence began to intensify in other counties, men like Dan Breen and Seamus Robinson who were on the run were sheltered and billeted for a time in Offaly. The RIC were beginning to lose control in the countryside and a boycott of members of the police and their families was strictly enforced. This boycott went as far as warning local dairymen not to supply milk to the wives and children of RIC men.⁵ Around this time GHQ re-organised the Offaly Brigade into two separate Brigades. The Number 1 Brigade was responsible for the Eastern Part of the county while the Number 2 Brigade was responsible for the Western and Southern parts. This seems to have been because GHQ felt that a single brigade structure covering an area from Edenderry in the East to Shinrone in the South was unwieldy.

The conflict escalates

In late March 1920 GHQ issued orders to all brigades in the Country to destroy all evacuated RIC barracks and to attack and destroy as many income tax offices as possible. The Offaly Volunteers burned vacated RIC barracks in Ballycumber, Cloghan, Clonmore, Thomastown, Killoughey and Mount Bolus and ransacked the tax offices in Bir and Tullamore destroying a large number of records.⁶ This was one of the first instances of local units acting in concert under direction from General Headquarters.

⁵ BMH WS 1711 Sean Dockery

⁶ *Irish Independent* 5-7 April 1920

The immediate result of these attacks was that the RIC were now able to operate only in the larger towns and villages and as a result control of the countryside was left to what was now known as the Irish Republican Army after the Dail assumed control over the Volunteers in September 1919.

The attack on Clara barracks on 2 June 1920 was the first attack by the IRA in Offaly on a major defended RIC Barracks. This attack was organised at Brigade level and involved over 150 men. Firstly all roads leading to Clara were blocked by the local IRA and a cordon thrown up around the town. A portion of the railway line between Tullamore and Clara was pulled up and telegraph wires were cut. The attackers then took possession of the family quarters at the rear of the barracks and removed the women and children to the nearby post office. They also took possession of Williams' Hotel opposite the barracks and opened up a major fusillade of rifle and shotgun fire on the barracks.⁷ The attackers then laid explosives at the wall of the barracks adjacent to the family quarters but the explosives were faulty and only succeeded in blowing a hole in the wall. The RIC inside used this opening to throw grenades at the attackers, which caused a number of casualties. The IRA kept up the attack for at least two hours but then decided to withdraw, taking their wounded with them. One of the wounded, Patrick Seery from Tyrellspass died a short time later from his injuries. On the same night an attack was also made on the RIC barracks in Geashill but this too was beaten off without casualties on either side.

The campaign against the police

The first Crown Force fatality of the War of Independence in Offaly was Special Constable Hannon who was kidnapped by a party of IRA men near Clonbullogue in June 1920. His decomposed body was found in bogland near Dangain the following year. His hands were bound and he had been shot in the head. There are no specific details as to why Hannon was targeted but it must be assumed he was making himself a nuisance with the local IRA and was seen as a danger to them.

In September 1920 Sergeant Maguire of the RIC was shot dead whilst part of a combined military and police party that were searching a house in Ferbane. The shot that killed him came from the house but it is unclear if this came from an occupant or a member of the search party who may have fired accidentally. Early in October a military patrol was held up by the IRA near Ferbane and their arms and bicycles taken. On 31 October Sergeant Henry Cronin was shot dead near his home in Tullamore. This man was very active against the IRA and orders came from GHQ that he had to be eliminated. The police in Tullamore went on a rampage that night and a number of premises including that of the Offaly Independent were burned or wrecked. The jury at the subsequent inquest condemned the killing, no doubt fearful of further reprisals.⁸ On 12 November a police lorry was ambushed near Geashill and two policemen were wounded. In February 1921 a police lorry was ambushed in Mount Lucas and five policemen were wounded.

7 *Irish Independent* 3 June 1920

8 *Irish Independent* 3 November 1920

On 1 April a patrol was attacked in Tullamore and a policeman wounded. One of the attacking party, Matthew Kane, was killed during the attack and his body discovered the following morning. On 17 May 1921 an active service unit of five men led by Joseph Connolly (who was probably the most effective IRA commandant in the county), who had been searching for RIC patrols to ambush attacked a cycling patrol of RIC in the village of Kinnity resulting in the deaths of two RIC men and the wounding of two others.⁹ When the IRA unit withdrew a number of local people assisted the injured policemen. A few nights later an IRA party returned to the village and some of those that assisted the police and relations of RIC members were forced to spend the night outdoors in their night clothes and had their furniture destroyed.¹⁰ The final police casualty of the war was an RIC constable who was shot and seriously wounded on the streets of Edenderry forty minutes before the Truce came into operation on 11 July 1921.

While the infliction of approximately twenty casualties on the Crown Forces during the War of Independence (of which only five were fatal) seems low when compared to other areas, the IRA did carry out a large number of other activities. Roads were continually blocked and bridges destroyed making travel by the police and military in the county extremely difficult. Vacated RIC barracks were burned to prevent their re-occupation and the mail was continually intercepted and any mail addressed to the military or police was seized. An excerpt from the report of the County Inspector of the RIC for June 1921 gives an idea of the state of the County as seen through the eyes of the police:

Seventy-three crimes of all kinds came to the notice of the police in King's County during the month of June. When it is stated that four murders, eight attempts at murder, twenty robberies, two cases of arson, twelve raids on mails, two burglaries, one housebreaking and fourteen cases of larceny are included in the totals it is hardly necessary to add that the condition of the county is serious.¹¹

The police boycott too was having an effect and the County Inspector described how in August 1920 the police now had to 'commandeer what they required or... to obtain their necessaries through friendly agents'.¹² This naturally had had an effect of the RIC, particularly the longer serving members who heretofore had considered themselves part of the community. Nevertheless, despite these activities the IRA in Offaly was not exactly well thought of by the senior officers in GHQ or indeed by officers in neighbouring counties. However, as was the case in other less active counties these small actions tied down large numbers of military and police and prevented them being used in the more troublesome counties and had a debilitating effect on morale.

9 BMH WS 1599 Joseph Connolly

10 PRO CO 904/115 Monthly report of County Inspector of RIC Kings County

11 PRO CO 904/115 Monthly report of County Inspector of RIC Kings County June 1921

12 PRO CO 904/112 August 1920

Relationship of the Offaly IRA with GHQ and neighbouring brigades

To say that the IRA in Offaly, and in particularly the No 2 Brigade, were regarded as unimpressive by General Headquarters could be classed as an understatement. Organisers were continuously sent to the country with a view to creating an active fighting force and to 'stir things up'. These met with varying degrees of success. Jeremiah Mee who resigned from the RIC at the Listowel 'mutiny' in June 1920 was an organiser for a time with the No. 2 Brigade in early 1921. He was cautious and agreed with the local commanders that the area was not suitable for large scale operations or ambushes. He was replaced by Liam Hogan who was anxious for a big operation but his plans for a large-scale attack on the RIC in Birr had to be aborted twice. He was recalled quickly afterwards and replaced by Thomas Burke. Burke was far more effective and activities in the No 2 area increased significantly in the last weeks before the Truce.

An example of the tetchy relations between GHQ and the No 2 Brigade can be seen from the failure to derail a troop train at Clara in February 1921. The Brigade Commander, Sean Mahon, sent a report of the incident to the Chief of Staff, Richard Mulcahy and received the following reply:

To Brigade O/C Offaly No 2

I am in receipt of your communication of the 16th inst enclosing reports from various officers regarding the failure of the operation of 26th February. To me the reports simply represent the continuation of the whole story of incompetency and sloveliness which began by your own missing of the afternoon train on the evening of the 25th. I do not want to pursue this particular matter any further, but I do however want you and your officers to recognise that work of this kind is simply tinkering with the honour of the nation and playing with the lives of the men who are acting under you and that there must not be a repetition of it. Unless each individual officer in Offaly No 2 shows that he appreciates his responsibilities he shall have to go and I am taking steps to ensure that a stricter watch will be kept over them in future. CS¹³

Mahon was arrested by the police shortly after this and his place as Brigade O/C was taken by Thomas Burke, the GHQ organiser. The IRA in Westmeath also believed that the senior officers in the Offaly No 2 Brigade sabotaged a large ambush they had planned as they did not want to see any increase in crown force activity in their area.¹⁴

Reactions of RIC and Military

Because of the comparative inactivity of the IRA in Offaly and in particular their lack of success in causing police casualties, the area was spared from the large scale reprisals and assassinations that were commonplace in other counties. The

13 Mulcahy Paper A17 224

14 BMG WS nos 1296, 1308, 1309 Thomas Costello, Harry O'Brien, Frank O'Connor

only civilian killed by the RIC was Patrick Kennedy who was shot 'for refusing to halt' in Moneygall on 3 January 1921. The *Irish Bulletin* at the time claimed he was shot when police fired on mourners at a funeral.¹⁵ Aside from this the only other reprisal of note was the burning and wrecking of a number of buildings in Tullamore after the killing of Sergeant Cronin.

With respect to the campaign in Offaly as a whole; one can sense the frustration of the local County Inspector with official policy in his monthly reports.¹⁶ Every report from the summer of 1920 onwards describes the state of the county as 'disturbed' or 'unsatisfactory'. In March 1921 he complains of the lack of prosecutions and the unwillingness of the authorities to reopen Court Houses. In April he complains of 'the desire of the Government to make peace' and that the public's knowledge of this 'buoys them up with the hope of victory'. By May 1921 he is calling for a 'small mobile force to strike quickly' because the 'military are too cumbersome'. In June he complains that 'Unless the Government realises that Sinn Féin dominates the Country by choice and by terror and takes measures accordingly; the IRA will win.' He also complains of a lack of manpower and the 'disheartening' effect it is having on the men.

Two somewhat surprising targets of the RIC's displeasure at the state of affairs in Offaly are the Roman Catholic clergy, particularly younger curates. In January 1921 the County Inspector complains that 'Some of the RC curates are exercising a baneful influence on the minds of their congregations'. A number of priests in the county including Fr Burbage from Geashill were interned by the authorities. The County Inspector somewhat contradicts himself in March 1921 when he complains that a priest who asked his congregation to 'abstain from crime soon found himself alone in the chapel. In May 1921 the County Inspector states 'there is no doubt whatever that the majority of members of the murder gang come from that organisation (The ITGWU) and from the ranks of shop assistants.' Others to meet the Inspector's ire were women who were accused in May 1921 of holding 'the most extreme views. He then goes on to say that the 'movement would have waned before this if the influence of the women had not kept it alive.'

The activities of the British military in Offaly was somewhat low key compared to other counties. Relations between the RIC and military seem to have been somewhat strained as this excerpt from the Police Report for May 1921 shows: 'Food hampers them [the military] to a great extent. A party of police will leave at dawn and perform duty all day on a crust of bread or a few biscuits but the military look for a solid meal at lunch-time and generally contrive to get it. It is no use to turn back from the scene of an ambush, when the trail is hot, and men's hearts aflame and go out again a week later with rations, canteens etc to make leisurely progress through the country'. The IRA tended to give the military a wide berth and other than a few incidents of disarming a rations party, patrols or isolated soldiers, there were no actual attacks on the military.

15 *Irish Bulletin* 25 January 1921 NLI

16 PRO CO 904/111-116 CI Reports June 1920-July 1921

Spies and Informers

As we have seen the IRA were responsible for the deaths of at most five policemen in the 1920–1921 period. However in the same period they shot six men for allegedly spying. As in other counties the shooting of spies and informers has been the most controversial part of the War of Independence. The witness statements given to the Bureau of Military History by Offaly participants have tended to say little about those shot for spying. Perhaps this is due to that fact that a small number of men would have been involved in the trial and execution of these men. The first incident of this type was a man named in the Military Archives as Pat Birmingham whose body was found at Cappincar, Tullamore on 5 May 1921 with a ‘Spies and Informers’ label attached.¹⁷ The next was an unidentified man whose body was found near Mount Bolus on 25 May. A report on this man’s execution was forwarded to GHQ by the battalion responsible detailing the reasons he was shot.¹⁸ This claims that the man whom they identify as ‘John Lawlor’ was previously asked to leave the area on the grounds he was a suspected spy. Joe Connolly states in his witness statement that the man was seen being ‘dropped’ by an RIC patrol.¹⁹

In early June Patrick Connell, an ex-soldier, was shot dead near Killeigh and his body labelled. On the night of 17 June two ex-soldiers, Michael Reilly from Cloghan and Thomas Cunningham from Belmont were taken from their houses and shot by the same IRA unit.

The report of 2nd Battalion No. 2 Offaly Brigade states simply ‘Two spies sentenced to death on June 12th executed at 12 midnight’.²⁰ The police and wives of the two men admit that the men were on ‘friendly terms with the police and military’ and were ‘loyal citizens’.²¹ In his report to GHQ on these executions Thomas Burke the O/C of the Offaly No. 2 Brigade states that ‘It was definitely established at the court that these men were continuously communicating with the enemy and helping to point out houses in which officers of the battalion were staying’.²²

The final death of the War of Independence in Offaly was that of a man found shot in Tullamore on the morning of 10 July 1921. Attached to his body was a card stating ‘Convicted Spy, Eric Steadman ex soldier, Birmingham.. Tried, convicted and executed on 9th July 1921. Sooner or later we get them. Beware of the IRA.’ At the subsequent Military Court of Inquiry and thereafter attempts were made by the military to confirm this man’s identity but to no avail.²³ At this remove it is doubtful if it can ever be found out exactly why some of these men were singled out for execution. The only common thread linking them is the fact that all would seem to have been ex-soldiers and were seen to be friendly with the police.

17 Military Archives A/0649/xviii

18 Mulcahy papers P7/A18 p264-267

19 BMH WS 1599

20 Mulcahy papers P7/A/20

21 WO/35 148,157B Courts of Inquiry in Lieu of Inquest

22 Beaslai Papers NLI Ms 33, 913

23 WO/35 162 unknown persons

Coolacrease

No other event in Offaly or indeed during the War of Independence as a whole has received as much attention in recent years as the shootings of Richard and Abraham Pearson at Coolacrease near Cadamstown on 30 June 1921. The bare facts are that on 30 June 1921 approximately 35 IRA members visited the farm of William Pearson with the intention of executing the four male members of the family. They found two of Pearson's sons, Richard and Abraham, making hay with another man who immediately ran away. This man's name was William Stanley. He was hiding from the IRA in Laois. The two brothers were brought from the field to the farmyard and informed that they were to be shot. A firing party was appointed and both brothers fell with a number of bullet wounds. The family house was then burned to the ground.

After the IRA party dispersed the family saw that both brothers were still alive. A doctor was sent for but despite his ministrations both brothers died during the night. The report of the No. 2 Offaly Brigade made to GHQ and dated 5 July 1921 states 'On the evening of 30th June two hostile unionists executed for levying war on this (Kinnity) company when operating a road blockade a week previous'.²⁴ The incident referred to was the shooting by the Pearsons at an IRA group who were engaged in felling a tree to blockade a road, resulting in the serious wounding of a Volunteers named Heeney.²⁵ This was a culmination of a number of events where tension between the Pearsons and local people had manifested themselves including the blocking of a pathway by the Pearsons used by local people on the way to Mass.

Despite later claims by the Pearsons, there is not a shred of evidence that there was any sectarian motive in the killings. In all police reports for Offaly for the period of the War of Independence no mention is made of any sectarian behaviour by the IRA. No other protestants in the Kinnity area were threatened or harmed. Likewise claims that the IRA used dum dum bullets or deliberately fired at the genital area have proven to be false.²⁶

Conclusion

While the number of casualties inflicted by the IRA on the Crown forces was low it was no worse than most other Leinster counties and does not necessarily mean the IRA in Offaly was totally ineffective. The Police Reports for the period show the concern they had for the state the county was in. The blocking of roads and railways in the county was extremely effective and won praise from the IRA journal *An tOglach*. The mail service had all but ceased to function and the court system was near collapse. The destruction of RIC barracks meant that large tracts of the countryside were free for the IRA to roam around. The shortage of weapons however meant the formation of a large flying column was not viable. Certainly the leadership of the IRA was not as effective as GHQ could have hoped but by

24 Mulcahy papers P7/A/20 p16

25 BMH WS 1712 Michael Cordial

26 *Coolacrease The true story of the Pearson executions*, Aubane Historical Society 2008.

the summer of 1921 this had been resolved and there was an upsurge in lethal violence in the weeks before the Truce. For all their reputed failings it must be conceded that the IRA in Offaly 'did their bit' in those turbulent times.