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My Years in the National Movement before 1916

By Eamonn Ó Duibhir

Editorial Introduction

Eamonn Ó Duibhir (1883-1963) of Ballagh, Clonoulty, was one of the pioneers of the national movement in Co. Tipperary before 1916. A leading IRB man, he was also in the Gaelic League and helped to form the first corps of the Irish Volunteers in the county. During the War of Independence he was an officer of the Third Tipperary Brigade, but left the IRA because of the effect on the civilian population of the activities of the Black and Tans. In 1956 he wrote a detailed account of his activities from 1904 to 1920 for the Military History Bureau. The *Tipperary Historical Journal* published an extract from this statement in its 1991 issue, and now publishes another covering the period before 1916. The Journal acknowledges the co-operation of Mr. Sean Ó Duibhir, Cashel, for permission to publish his late father's MS, and also the co-operation of Mrs. Kitty Barry, Clogher, Clonoulty, for her assistance generally.

My interest in national matters was aroused by the Irish lessons in the *Weekly Freeman*, and also by the news of the Boer War. Like most young fellows in the neighbourhood [Ballagh], I was pro-Boer and anti-English! Later on I got in touch with *United Irishman*, Arthur Griffith's paper, and also with the paper of William P. Ryan, *The Irish Peasant*. I and a couple of others in the locality wrote articles for *The Irish Peasant*.

About 1904 or 1905 the parish priest of Knockavilla, the famous Father Matt Ryan, announced at Mass one Sunday that Irish classes would start the following week under a native Irish speaker from Ballyvourney [Co. Cork]. I had left the Primary School at Ballagh when I was 13 years of age. When the news went around that the Irish languages was about to be revived, we went along to the classes, filling the schoolhouse at Knockavilla. The teacher was a brilliant lady who, I think, later became Mother Superior of a convent in Kilkenny. She was a Miss Annie Dennehy.

As we got to know Irish we found that there were some old people locally who had some smattering of Irish. In one of the districts near Cashel, Camas, quite a number of the old people were Irish speakers, among them Pádraig Breathnach. At that class I became acquainted with Richard Treacy of Bishopswood, who later became the chairman of the local Sinn Féin club and was imprisoned in Belfast Jail under very trying conditions.

Another man I met at this class was Michael Shechan, who in later years took an active part in the independence struggle. When he died, he was a captain in the National Army. The first secretary of Sinn Féin in Dundrum, Thomas O'Dwyer, having emigrated to England, was conscripted in the First World War and killed in action in France.

As the years went on we formed a branch of the National Council. The Dungannon Clubs had been established about the same time; their principal use for us was to send us along "stick-up" literature urging men not to join the British army, navy or constabulary forces. Once the R.I.C. man was seen coming out from Mass in Knockavilla with one of these leaflets pasted on the back of his tunic!



As a result of statements made by me in the *Tipperary Star* when a British regiment reached Templemore, they seized all the copies of the paper and made a bonfire of them in the street. One of the journalists at the *Star* office (the Assistant Editor I think, one Michael Fitzgerald) arrived in Templemore on the next train with a large bundle of the papers.

As he stepped on the platform where British soldiers were hanging around, he drew a revolver and said: "Come on and burn the *Star* now and see if you can get away with it". He succeeded in distributing the newspaper without any attack being made on him.

Before 1908 we had formed a local Sinn Féin club with Richard Treacy as President and Sean O'Dwyer as Secretary, and I filled the role of general organiser. We called a public meeting at Dundrum to spread the gospel of Sinn Féin which was addressed by Alderman Cole from Dublin and local speakers. Just before the close of the meeting Father Matt Ryan arrived and came on the brake from which the meeting was being addressed and spoke strongly in favour of Sinn Féin. Up to then he had not been a member of Sinn Féin, but now he joined the club, and was probably the first priest to join Sinn Féin in the county. Although Sinn Féin survived in the area, for some of the period after that it was weak until after the 1916 Rising.

The IRB next featured in my life. One day when I was in Thurles James Kennedy, later town clerk of Thurles, brought me in amongst the machinery in the *Tipperary Star* office. There he administered the IRB oath to me, which I kept faithfully though sometimes under serious difficulties, especially in later years when we became disunited.

I became local IRB Centre and I went out to administer the oath by getting our members in Sinn Féin and the Gaelic League to join the IRB. Undoubtedly the IRB was a great help to us to hold our friends together in the difficult years that followed.

When Sinn Féin was again at a low ebb, although not in our part of the countryside, the labour troubles in Dublin came into my life. We were in our area in sympathy with Jim Larkin in his struggle to lift up the downtrodden, and despite all the whispering and open campaign against him and against the Dublin workers, we raised some funds to help the men locked out in the city.

Dublin was in a serious condition. The constabulary were having a fairly free hand, but the crowd were inclined to fight and I had the opportunity of giving a little help on the quayside in one of these altercations, and I think on that occasion we got the better of the argument.

I was very foolish at the time in getting into it, as I had just bought two revolvers for the IRB and had them in my pocket at the time and forgot I had such compromising weapons in my possession when the struggle with the RIC began at the quayside. At Liberty Hall I had the



Sean O'Dwyer, *Connra na Gaeilge*, Cashel, laying a wreath at the monument of Eamon Ó Duibhir.

pleasure of seeing Countess [Markiewicz], who was in charge of a soup kitchen for the workers.

Later in 1913 the struggle in Dublin died down. I was in the city only for about a fortnight and that was at the height of the struggle. Some time after coming home, in November of that year, the Irish Volunteers had been formed at a meeting in the Rotunda. When we passed the word around that the Volunteers had been formed in Dublin we called a meeting in Ballagh. A great crowd of young men came there that evening and we formed the first company of the Irish Volunteers in Co. Tipperary. Later, it became the centre of a battalion and as it grew, we called it the Kilnamanagh Battalion.

I have forgotten to mention that some time around 1907 or 1908 we had the honour of being visited by Sean MacDiarmada. He was an organiser for either the Dungannon Clubs or Sinn Féin, I am not sure which. He had called to Richard Treacy in a ramshackle motor car and Treacy brought him along to me. I remember distinctly that I was cutting hay with a scythe in the meadow at the time when he arrived.

On a winter night in one of these years Liam Mellows arrived from Gooldscross [railway station]. He was organising for the Fianna Scouts and he was hoping we would be able to do something as to getting up a group of the Fianna, but that was beyond our capabilities at the time.

The IRB meetings I attended were held in Cashel in the house of Padraig C. O'Mahony. He lived at that time in Cashel and was a postal clerk, but under cover he was the County Centre for the IRB. Amongst those who came there was Frank Drohan of Clonmel, later the O/C. of the Clonmel Battalion of the Volunteers.

Next we began organising a local company of Irish Volunteers in the surrounding parishes and getting down to a course of drilling. For this purpose we secured the services of an ex-British soldier – I think an N.C.O. named Jack Morris. Later in 1914 a District Council was formed in the area with Pierce McCann in charge, and he was later elected O/C. for Co. Tipperary.

On the evening of July 27, 1914, when our company had gathered for drill in Knockavilla parish, news reached us of the happenings of the previous evening at Bachelor's Walk, Dublin, and the landing of arms at Howth. There was great excitement and all the members of the company volunteered to take the field if required.

In August 1914 began the First World War and some of the pro-British landed people made up their minds to join us, and some Irish Party followers induced us one evening to march to Killenure, near Knockavilla, to be reviewed by Major Cooper. Our men drew up in two ranks. When Major Cooper had reviewed the men he turned on the propaganda and asked any who could to volunteer to fight for "King and Country". I immediately called on the Volunteers to march off the field and they did so, leaving him standing astounded with only about half a dozen of the Irish Party followers.

I remember being told at an IRB meeting after the commencement of the war of the Supreme Council decision to work for a rising now that war had begun. There was a chaotic situation by this time in the Irish Volunteers which lasted until Redmond declared himself for supporting Britain on September 20 1914. Meetings were then called all over the county so that the Volunteers would decide where they stood.

Recruiting meetings for the British army had already begun and one of the biggest of those was called for Tipperary town. It was some time that year also that I met Sean Treacy for the first time. He lived about ten miles from my place and he came frequently to the Irish classes in Ballagh. When the Volunteers were formed by me at Ballagh he came along, and after that he began to recruit the Volunteers in Tipperary town. He was already a member of the IRB.



Regarding this great recruiting meeting called for Tipperary town, we decided we would make things "lively". We put up a lot of anti-recruiting posters around the town and neighbourhood. Amongst the leaders against the recruiters were Sean Treacy, William Benn, Louis Dalton, Jim O'Connell, Michael O'Callaghan, Jim Ryan and myself.

In that year also I made trips to Dublin to get some arms and ammunition. I remember vividly one incident there. I had brought some money with me to buy arms and I think my dealings were with Sean McGarry of the IRB. So far as I can recall he was working for a company called Ediswan in what is now Pearse St.

Sometime in that period too Diarmuid Lynch came to us from the IRB in Cork with some automatic pistols. Those, I think, were .32 pistols, and I had one of them for some years, but they were practically useless, because they jammed on the slightest provocation.

In turn we now held Irish Volunteer recruiting meetings all over the area. These were addressed by P. C. O'Mahony, who was County Centre of the IRB, Seamus O'Neill, who was a professor in Rockwell College, Pierce McCan, Richard Treacy, myself and others. At the close of 1914 we had a loosely organised battalion which we named the Kilnamanagh Battalion, to which I was either elected O/C. or appointed myself thereto. I had to do most of the appointments for some time! There were battalions elsewhere similarly loosely organised.

Finance came out of our own pockets in 6d [2.5p] and 1/- [5p] weekly subscriptions. By those means we bought any equipment secured by us, and that was the position for several years. The IRB and Sinn Féin were similarly maintained. Connra na Gaeilge had its annual collection, dances, concerts and feiseanna, but sometimes these did not pay their way. The Gaelic League at that time and for some years after paid the Irish teachers, and so it remained for many years.

I come next to 1915. One of the big events of that year was the Gaelic League Ard Fheis at Dundalk, where the IRB got control and Douglas Hyde, its founder, resigned. In later years we came to the conclusion that that was a mistake, that the Gaelic League should have been kept out of politics all the time.

Some time in that year Ernest Blythe came organising to Tipperary, and he stayed at Gooldscross for a time at the house of a friend of mine named James Kearns, who worked on the railway. On 1 August Con Deere and I were [in Dublin] at the O'Donovan Rossa funeral, where Pearse's historic address at the graveside made a great impression on us. Drilling continued and I remember being at the IRB Conference in Dublin in October or November.

Some time also that year The O'Rahilly, who was handling the question of securing arms and supplies for the Volunteers, got in touch with me. I was summoned to Dublin, where he asked me to go round and buy up all the shotguns and ammunition, rifles and revolvers throughout Munster, and to see if it were possible to get any of the National Volunteers' arms. I covered a good deal of Tipperary and some of Cork and Waterford and Limerick (especially Limerick City) and I got quite a good deal. The principal helper I had was Michael Dolan, a hardware merchant in Cashel.

As regards the National [Redmondite] Volunteer arms, I was not able to get very many of those, but I helped to engineer one coup in Dungarvan. Dan Fraher happened to be treasurer of the National Volunteers in Dungarvan. As most people know, he was very prominent in the Gaelic Athletic Association. His son-in-law, Pat Whelan, was later commandant of the IRA in Co. Waterford.

Dan had no authority to give rifles away, but he told me in Irish one night where they were to be had, and so 25 Lee Enfield rifles found their way eventually to Dublin, and as far as I know were in the hands of the Volunteers before the Easter Rising.

I don't recall when I finished my business with The O'Rahilly, but it must have been some

time in 1916. He was very pleased with my work, and told me so on Easter Sunday morning 1916 when he called to my place with the [countermanding] order from Eoin MacNeill.

I have already stated that I and several others in our area were in sympathy with Jim Larkin and Connolly in their efforts to make life better for the Irish workers, and that for about a fortnight I was in Dublin in 1913 and in the thick of the struggles on the quaysides. Before this I had met William O'Brien of the Labour Party. A Miss Bridget Ryan of Bishopstown in Knockavilla parish went to work with William's two sisters. My sister Katie, who also worked in Dublin, called to the O'Brien home to see Miss Ryan. She was made very welcome by the Misses O'Brien and they became lifelong friends.

I accompanied her on a visit to O'Brien's and that is how I first met William O'Brien. I got to know him very well, and also, in the years that followed, I got to know Larkin, Tom Johnson, Tom Foran, P. T. Daly and other Labour leaders.

Late in 1915 my sister told me that William O'Brien wanted me to call on him at Liberty Hall on my next visit to the city. There seemed to be some urgency in the matter, so I went to Dublin a week or so later and from Kingsbridge [Heuston station] went direct to Liberty Hall. William O'Brien told me that James Connolly desired to talk with me, that he wanted information about the outlook of the Volunteers in regard to a rising.

William O'Brien ushered me into Connolly's office, and Connolly came to the point in his forthright way. He said he knew that Clarke and MacDiarmada, Pearse and O'Rahilly regarded me as a trusted Volunteer officer, and that O'Brien had told him of my long association with national affairs and my friendship for Labour.

He had been told by O'Brien that I also regarded him [Connolly] as a national leader. I intimated that such was correct. Connolly then said that, as that was my viewpoint, I would have trust in him as he had trust in me. "Certainly", I replied, "but in case of our discussing any matter that the IRB would be concerned in, I will have to report on it to my chiefs as I am an IRB centre".

"That is all right with me", said Connolly. He pointed out then that he feared the Volunteer leaders, if they intended a rising at all, might put it off until it would be too late. The time to act was while England was at war, and the war could not last forever. He said he was determined to strike before long, unless he had some assurance that the Irish Volunteers would strike soon.

He then queried me directly on this point and asked me if I could tell him if a rising were projected. I replied that there appeared to be every certainty that a rising would take place, and that if he came out prematurely with the Citizen Army the planning for a rising by the bigger organisation would be gravely injured. He agreed that this was the general opinion of Irish Volunteer members, but that he could not wait much longer.

He asked me if I could give him any assurance as to when the rising might take place. I told him that I had no knowledge of dates, but from many hints and indications I felt that there was every probability of a rising in the coming year. I said that the wisest course was for him to meet Pearse, Clarke and MacDiarmada and reach an agreement with them, and that I was going directly to see Clarke and report the talk to him.

"Do", said Connolly, "and I am hoping now that something may come out of our talk". He thanked me and shook my hand warmly. I went directly from Liberty Hall and told Tom Clarke what had transpired. I said that in my opinion a meeting between Connolly and the Supreme Council should be arranged. Clarke agreed. He said that it was vital that this should be done and that my talk with Connolly was very valuable. The time of these events was either later November or early December 1915.

In 1915 or early in 1916 I published *The Gael*, a weekly paper of nationalistic propaganda. The



printers were the Gaelic Press of Dublin, and the distribution was done from there by my direction. I was entirely responsible for this paper though, as time went on, it was warmly approved by Tom Clarke and Patrick Pearse.

Along with this work and my own business of agencies I continued to work for The O'Rahilly. The "stuff" when bought went here and there, and sometimes I had very little to do with its distribution, having only to report on the purchases and where the stuff was to O'Rahilly, who attended to most of the distribution. Occasionally I had to attend to the distribution. On one occasion some shotguns and a good deal of ammunition were stored at my home. Just before the Rising we left a big quantity of this at the house of a Mr. Sayers, a Protestant solicitor living near Gooldscross.

