

LEITRIM'S REPUBLICAN PAST

Cormac Ó Suilleabháin

IRISH NATIONALISM and Republicanism have always aroused much debate. They are hard to avoid. Most aspects of our life—be it religion, business, politics, sport or culture—have them woven into their very fabric. Our bookshelves are packed with publications covering every angle of our patriotic past whilst emotive films such as 'Michael Collins' and 'The Wind that Shakes the Barley' paint vivid images of the fight for Independence and the horror of the Civil War. The revival earlier this year of the State's Official Commemoration of the 1916 Rising invoked further debate on that period. The most contemporary manifestation of republicanism came with the Northern Troubles, the momentous ceasefires and resultant peace process, all of which have caused many to re-ignite their nationalist outlook and perspective. However whilst much has been written and commented on the broader question, few have analysed how nationalism or republicanism, in all its form, functioned at a local level in Leitrim. The activities of Sean MacDiarmada are well known, but that aside, do we really know the true extent of our contribution to the national cause? How many died in Leitrim's War of Independence? What about our Civil War? How did it affect our politics? What role did Leitrim play in the various IRA Campaigns which followed? These are questions which need answering. These are stories that need to be told.

From the beginning of the century Leitrim's republican credentials were

strong and much of this was due to MacDiarmada. When Sinn Fein fought its first ever election it did so in his native county and he was Director of Elections. Eight years later he was immortalised forever, firmly putting Leitrim on the nationalist map. In the Rising's aftermath, hundreds of republicans were rounded up and interned in Frongach, Wales including some from Leitrim, two of whom would later become prominent TDs. Throughout 1917 and 1918 the political pendulum began to swing and three of Leitrim's neighbouring counties became embroiled in hotly contested bye-elections. In each case—Roscommon, Longford and Cavan—Sinn Fein emerged victorious and set the scene for their General Election victory of December 1918. The party swept the boards but in Leitrim they went one step further, when James Dolan, an ex-Frongach internee, recorded the highest winning margin of any candidate in the country. His election was all the more noteworthy given that he was imprisoned in England for his part in the infamous 'German Plot', along with many other TDs. As Dail Eireann met for the first time, the militants were organising themselves and in Leitrim, IRA companies were formed in every parish. It took some time for the county's War of Independence to really take hold but when it did it was violent and bloody. In total there were seventeen deaths in Leitrim which could be directly or indirectly attributed to the conflict, with no less than fourteen of those taking place in an eight week period

between March and May of 1921 (See Table 1.0).

The Truce of July 1921 proved a welcome relief initially but it was a false dawn. When the Treaty negotiations concluded in December, there followed three weeks of frantic political activity. Eventually on 7th January 1922 the Dail voted by 64 votes to 57 to accept the Treaty, amid great tension and emotion. In Leitrim it is difficult to assess the true level of support or otherwise for the agreement. In common with most areas, the predominant feeling appears to have been that it was better to accept and whilst the Treaty did not give everything sought, it gave something. Furthermore it was strongly argued by Pro-Treaty supporters that the agreement would prove to be a stepping-stone to greater things. Consequently the County Council voted unanimously to accept with one councillor claiming that 90% of the people of Leitrim supported it. Similarly the South Leitrim Executive of Sinn Fein voted by 39 votes to 15 to accept. And yet when we examine the results of the General Election a few months later, the Sligo/Leitrim Constituency returned one of the highest Anti-Treaty votes in the country.

Once the partition of Ireland became official the focus of attention temporarily shifted to the border itself and in Leitrim's case, the fact that its neighbouring county Fermanagh was now in a different jurisdiction. For that reason the opening months of 1922 saw much action along the

border with even Michael Collins covertly approving of actions in the Six Counties. Five Leitrim men were centrally involved when arrested at Enniskillen and jailed for the attempted kidnapping of Sir Basil Brooke of Brookeborough. But their actions and imprisonment in Scotland were soon forgotten as divisions deepened in the new Free State and the horror of Civil War flared up.

Locally, Leitrim was fortunate to avoid the type of bitter conflict witnessed elsewhere but it would be wrong to disregard the terrible events which did take place in the county. Whilst there were only seven deaths in the county during the Civil War period, June 1922 to May 1923, there was a strong Leitrim involvement in other flashpoints in neighbouring counties. Furthermore available records indicate that many Leitrim natives, and possibly more undocumented, were killed in combat outside the county. (*See Table 1.2 & 1.3*).

Eighty years on it is difficult to comprehend the depth of sensitivities and tensions that existed in Leitrim throughout this period. Times were tough. Many died. And yet it did not end there. In truth Leitrim's War did not end with the Civil War. For decades there was an unofficial conflict, a form of unfinished business. From whatever perspective one sits, the story of Leitrim's Republican past needs to be told. He who knows nothing of his past knows nothing at all!

The above article is an excerpt from a study of Leitrim's Republican Past which will be published next year by Ballinamore native, Cormac Ó Suilleabháin.

Table 1.0 Casualties in Leitrim's War of Independence 1919-1921

Month/Year	Name of Deceased	Location of Death
1 May 1920	Francis Curran (Civilian)	Aughavas
2 Sept 1920	Pat Gill (IRA)	Drumsna
3 Sept 1920	James Connolly (IRA)	Kinlough
4 Mar 1921	Edmund Wilson (B/Army)	Sheemore, Carrick-on-Shannon
5 Mar 1921	Seamus Wrynn (IRA)	Selton Hill, Gortvagh
6	John Joe O'Reilly (IRA)	Selton Hill, Gortvagh
7	John Joe O'Reilly (IRA)	Selton Hill, Gortvagh
8	Micheal Baxter (IRA)	Selton Hill, Gortvagh
9	Joe Beirne (IRA)	Selton Hill, Gortvagh
10	Sean Connolly (IRA)	Selton Hill, Gortvagh
11 Mar 1921	William Latimer (Civilian)	Gortvagh
12 Apr 1921	John Harrison (Civilian)	Garadice, Ballinamore,
13 Apr 1921	James McGlynn (IRA)	Drumshanbo
14 Apr 1921	Wilfred Jones (RIC)	Ballinamore
15 Apr 1921	Constable Muggins (RIC)	Ballinamore
16 May 1921	Constable Tusker (RIC)	Ballinamore
17 May 1921	Leonard Hart (RIC)	Bridge St, Ck-on-Shannon

Table 1.2 Casualties in Leitrim Post Treaty/Civil War 1922 - 1923

Month/Year	Name of Deceased	Location of Death
1 Apr 1922	Edwin Plumb (B Special)	Leitrim/Fermanagh Border near Garrison
2 May 1922	JJ McLoughlin (Pro-Treaty)	Gowel, Carrick-on-Shannon
3 Nov 1922	Phil Gilgunn (Anti-Treaty)	Manorhamilton
4 Sept 1922	James Dolan (Free State)	Drumshanbo
5 Dec 1922	Carson Dennison (Civilian)	Drumkeerin
6	Tom Dennison (Civilian)	Drumkeerin
7 Mar 1923	Dr Muldoon (Civilian)	Mohill
8 May 1923	Patrick Keville (Pro-Treaty)	Dissly, Mohill
9 Mar 1924	PJ Kane (Pro-Treaty)	Rossan, Aughavas

Table 1.3 Other Casualties with Leitrim Connections 1916 -1923

Month/Year	Name of Deceased	Native of	Location of Death	Circumstances
1 Apr 1916	Micheal Mulhern (RIC)	Ck-on-Shannon	Dublin	Killed during Easter Rising
2 May 1916	Sean MacDiarmada (IRB)	Kiltyclogher	Kilmainham	Executed after Easter Rising
3 Nov 1920	Constable Larkin (RIC)	Co Leitrim	Tubberclair, Westmeath	Killed in War of Indep
4 May 1921	John Boylan (RIC)	Co Leitrim	Maam, Connemara	Killed in War of Indep
5 May 1921	James McNamee (Civilian)	Mohill	Newtowncashel, Longford	Killed in War of Indep
6 May 1921	Jim McCormack (RIC)	Lgh Rynn, Mohill	Killoclin, Kerry	Killed in War of Indep
7 July 1921	Micheal Watters (RIC)	Co Leitrim	Dromore, Tyrone	Shot himself
8 Apr 1922	John Bruen (RIC)	Co Leitrim	Belfast	Killed in Belfast
9 June 1922	James Connolly (Anti-Treaty)	Kinlough	Finner Camp	Killed in Civil War
10 June 1922	John Connolly (Anti-Treaty)	Kinlough	Donegal	Killed in Civil War
11 June 1922	Farrell Leddy (Pro-Treaty)	Co Leitrim	Newbridge	Shot Accidentally
12 Sept 1922	Tom Tiernan (Pro-Treaty)	Mohill	Kilkelly, Mayo	Killed in Civil War
13 Sept 1922	Thomas Rall (Pro-Treaty)	Aughavas	Seeskin Valley, Mayo	Killed in Civil War
14 Oct 1922	James Grennan (Pro-Treaty)	Foxfield	Ship Street, Dublin	Shot dead in Barracks
15 Nov 1922	Pete McCartan (Pro-Treaty)	Unknown	Ailesbury Rd, Dublin	Killed in Civil War
16 Nov 1922	George O'Dowd (Pro-Treaty)	Jamestown	Westport, Mayo	Shot Accidentally