

Leitrim 1916-1918

a changing political environment!

Padraig McGarty

ONE HUNDRED YEARS ago in Leitrim, and across Ireland, in the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising, Irish society was slowly changing, with a new political mood emerging among the people. A few short months previously, the county and the country were supporting John Redmond's Irish Party, and their local political organisations, the United Irish League (UIL) and the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH). In Europe, England was at war with Germany with many Leitrim men fighting in the trenches of France. The republicanism espoused by Sean Mac Diarmada and the 1916 leaders had few supporters in the county in the months and years prior to April 1916. The vast majority of people supported the Irish Party led by John Redmond, and the political doctrine of Home Rule. Within a matter of months, this support totally disappeared as a result of the executions of the rebel leaders and the internment of thousands of Irishmen in the aftermath of the Rising. Failed attempts by the British Government to initiate a Home Rule settlement in Summer 1916 in the face of Unionist resistance in Ulster, contributed a fatal blow to the credibility of Redmond and the Irish Party.

A changing mood soon emerged, when Thomas Flynn declared at a session of Carrick District Council that "the men who died in Dublin for the betterment of their country were as good Irishmen as ever lived". The foundation of the Irish National Aid Association and Volunteer Dependents Fund (INA&VDF) in the summer of 1916 to support the families of the executed and imprisoned insurgents from the Rising, played a crucial role in the



radicalisation of Irish political life in the months and years following the Rising. While many of its leaders were dead or jailed, the INA & VDF established a republican organisational apparatus across Ireland. Although its primary focus was welfare, it played a decisive role in keeping the memory of the Easter Rising alive, and also laid the foundation stone for a new political movement in 1917. INA & VDF branches were established across the county in Mohill, Cloone, Carrick and Ballinaglera. The first fundraising activities were a series of open air dances in the Cloone area at the end of May 1916 organized by two local women, Katie Healy and Annie Doyle. The success of the local committees was reflected in police reports which in July 1916 reported a sum of £223-7-0 collected in the Mohill and Carrick districts. Another feature of the INA & VDF branches was the presence of the local clergy as major contributors. In noting the support of local parish priest Fr P King, and his curate Rev P Cahill, the Ballinaglera Committee

■ *Republican Politicians: Harry Boland Michael Collins & Eamon de Valera.*

acknowledged subscriptions to the amount of £18-5-0, including £1 each from the two local priests. The decision of the Ballinaglera branch was: "to forward the amount at once through our respected parish priest, who has done so much to make the fund such a success in which he had the able assistance of our worthy curate." In Mohill, the nuns at the local Convent of Mercy, and local clergy were the highest contributors to the fund. The support of the clergy for the INA & VDF ensured its success among many of the moderate sections of Leitrim society. The organisation also provided an alternate vehicle of political expression for some sections of nationalist Ireland, never wholly comfortable with the political philosophy of the Irish Party.

A collection in Gortvagh in July 1916 was reflective of many parishes across the county. Donations ranging from ten

shillings to six pence came from a broad range of people including the local priest, grocer, and a national school teacher, with the majority of the contributions coming from the small farmers of the locality. Two of the donors were members of the Methodist and Church of Ireland congregations, and one was an RIC pensioner. In October 1916, Rev T Daniston PP of Fenagh, headed the list of subscribers to the prisoner dependent's fund in the parish with a contribution of £1. RIC police reports from Leitrim in November 1916 concluded that, "there is a good deal of sympathy with the Sinn Féin movement". One of the first public demonstrations of collective sympathy for advanced nationalism was the celebration of a High Mass for Sean Mac Diarmada in his local parish church in Kiltyclogher in November 1916. Large crowds from North Leitrim and the neighbouring counties of Sligo, Cavan and Fermanagh attended the mass that had over twenty priests as choir members and chanters. Despite a changing political climate, the *Leitrim Observer* did not directly refer to the Easter Rising in its review of the year. The last edition of the year carried stories of local soldiers home from the battlefields of Europe on Christmas leave, where: "many of our great sons met their end". The editorial gave a general welcome to the release of the Easter Rising internees by Britain's new Prime Minister Lloyd George, and proclaimed that, "this was a wise decision on the part of the new government, and we hope an indication of greater things in anticipation by them for the material prosperity and advancement of Ireland".

A report on the death of James J O'Kelly, Irish Party MP for North Roscommon was also carried. The resulting by-election caused by the death of O'Kelly would prove to be the first signs of the electoral demise of constitutional nationalism.

In its first edition of the New Year, the *Leitrim Observer* reported the speculation

in the Dublin dailies on a replacement candidate for James J O'Kelly with the view that: "the Sinn Féiners would nominate a man now serving a term of penal servitude in England for his connection with the recent Rebellion".

While a prisoner was not chosen to contest the election, the eventual selection of Count Plunkett, father of Joseph Mary Plunkett, an executed 1916 leader, proved a wise choice. Plunkett won the by election and victory parades were held in Mohill, Ballinamore, Drumshanbo and Ballinaglera. At a victory celebration at the Bush Hotel in Carrick, Arthur Griffith declared that, "the election was the greatest victory since Clare returned Dan O'Connell". Recognising the work of many of Carrick's inhabitants, Drumlion AOH congratulated Plunkett and thanked "the young men of Carrick on Shannon for the admirable work they did during the recent election". In its analysis of the Roscommon result the *Leitrim Observer* noted that it was a timely warning for the Irish Party stating "the disregard by the Liberals and Tories of Ireland's demand for self-government, and the belief in the "wait and see" policy by Mr Redmond and his Party were amongst the reasons for North Roscommon deciding by so big a majority".

Police reports again assessed a changing political mood. In February 1917 the RIC County Inspector for Leitrim reported on the growing attraction of Sinn Féin noting that: "if anything I think this sympathy is increasing". Further police reports in April 1917 noted growing support for Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin flags were erected and subsequently removed by police in Dromod and Carrick. The County Inspector reported that the impending by-election in neighbouring Longford was giving a fresh impetus to republicanism. While Plunkett's victory in Roscommon initiated the growth of republicanism in the region, Joe McGuinness's victory in

South Longford was instrumental in the acceleration of support for Sinn Féin in Leitrim. South Longford was a constituency with no strong history of republicanism, and the Irish Party campaigned strongly to retain the parliamentary seat. When the result was declared in South Longford, celebrations began across neighbouring Leitrim. Sinn Féin flags were flown from buildings in Ballinamore, and crowds thronged the streets. A torchlight procession headed by the Drumreilly and Aughnasheelin bands led the marchers through the town. By July 1917 police reported a rapid growth of Sinn Féin clubs across the county with sixteen clubs and a membership comprising seven hundred and twenty eight people established. James Dolan from Manorhamilton, the brother of Charles Dolan, the 1908 Sinn Féin election candidate, and recently released prisoner, was identified as the main organiser in the county. With the rise of Sinn Féin in the Spring and Summer of 1917, small companies of Volunteers were established in Gortvagh, Mohill and Aughnasheelin. Eamon de Valera's victory in a by-election in East Clare in July 1917 gave added impetus to the growth of Sinn Féin. The growth of Sinn Féin continued unabated in Leitrim throughout the summer of 1917. Large meetings were held in Ballinamore on 15 July, and Mohill on 29 July. At Ballinamore, a resolution was passed congratulating the electors of East Clare on returning de Valera and for, "striking a blow at the deceivers of the Irish people who carried on nothing but jobbery and bossism". New Sinn Féin clubs were formed on a continual basis throughout the late summer of 1917, with most taking the names of the executed leaders of 1916 in their club names. At the inaugural meeting of the Sean Mac Diarmada Sinn Féin Club in Carrick on 19 August, a young man named Michael Collins was the main speaker. Collins urged clubs to be formed in every

district in order to gain power at district and county council level, with the ultimate goal of capturing the Parliamentary seat. Earlier that day, Collins attended Mass in Gowel, and spoke at the local Roger Casement Sinn Féin club outlining the main policies of Sinn Féin, and its underlying principles. Michael Collins would later become one of the foremost national leaders in the political and military battle with Britain.

Aeríochtaí, open-air Irish concerts, were common features of Sinn Féin gatherings in the county. At an Aeríocht in Ballinamore on Sunday 2 September, "one of the biggest gatherings of people ever witnessed in any part of South Leitrim", the crowds gathered to welcome newly elected MP for South Longford Joe McGuinness, and Harry Boland to Leitrim. Boland was a prominent republican and veteran of the 1916 Rising. On the journey to Ballinamore the previous night, hundreds of people gathered at Mohill, Gorravagh and Fenagh to welcome McGuinness to the county. McGuinness dismissed claims that Sinn Féin was a new phenomenon that would disappear quickly. Sinn Féin, according to McGuinness, was a political party with a policy, "that was advocated for seven hundred and fifty years and was not a new movement". McGuinness called on the people to ensure that Sinn Féin represented them on local councils, and to make their local Sinn Féin clubs intellectual centres where Irish language and history were taught and discussed. In supporting the meeting's call for Thomas Smyth, the local Irish Party MP, to resign, McGuinness condemned Smyth's record and the lack of development of the Cavan and Leitrim Railway, and the nearby Arigna coal mines. At an Aeríocht in Eslin on 23 September, a visiting speaker, Sean Brown from Dublin asked the meeting to pass a resolution to call the attention of European powers, and the United States to President Wilson's declaration in relation to Russia,



■ Michael Collins

when Wilson declared that: "that no people should be forced under a sovereignty under which it does not desire to live". Referring to Smyth and his pro recruitment record, the meeting heard that they were not prepared to continue to be led by people who misrepresent them.

The death of Thomas Ashe, another jailed 1916 leader, by forced feeding while on hunger strike in late September 1917, brought widespread condemnation across Ireland. Ashe's death accelerated sympathy towards Sinn Féin and his massive funeral, attended by tens of thousands of people, demonstrated the widespread emerging support for republicanism. In Leitrim, condemnations on the nature of his death, and expressions of sympathy to his family were passed by Sinn Féin Clubs throughout the county. By the end of September 1917, Sinn Féin had established two executive structures for the north and south of the county. James Dolan presided over the North Leitrim Sinn Féin Executive, while Michael Murphy presided over its southern counterpart.

Twenty eight clubs with a membership of nearly fifteen hundred people were in place in the county. Popular sympathy for Ashe continued into October when month's memory masses were held in Mohill and Carrick. In both towns, shops closed as an expression of sympathy to Ashe during the ceremonies.

Police reports in October 1917 indicated that, "the various political societies in the county are inactive with the exception of the GAA and Sinn Féin. The latter is spreading rapidly". At an Aeríocht in Carraigallen on the 7th of October, attended by eighteen hundred people, Arthur Griffith reminisced on the 1908 North Leitrim election where he worked with Sean Mac Diarmada. According to Griffith, the Irish Party had large resources available to them in the defeat of Sinn Féin in 1908. In 1917 Griffith claimed that the roles were now reversed and, "people who believed in the Party and who supported it with unstinting loyalty have found that Party out for what we had found it out ten years ago, and they are determined to get rid of it". On the same day in the south of the county, another prominent speaker, the newly elected MP for Kilkenny, William Cosgrave and Darrell Figgis spoke at an Aeríocht in Dromod. Cosgrave spoke of the death of Thomas Ashe, and his memories of Ashe teaching the Irish language in Lewes Jail. On the same platform, Peter Paul Galligan a 1916 veteran spoke of the need to use the long winter evenings to learn Irish language and history.

Prominent speakers continued to visit the county. Newly elected Sinn Féin President, Eamon de Valera, and Harry Boland spoke as part of an Aeríocht organised by the local Edward Daly Sinn Féin Club in Mohill on 18 November. The visitors arrived the previous evening, and were escorted by thirty horsemen and a torchlight procession to a reception in the local Canon Donohue Hall. At the beginning



■ de Valera

of the meeting the following day, de Valera was formally welcomed to the town by an address from the Mohill

Board of Guardians. Thanking the Board, de Valera spoke of his appreciation for the formal welcome, "because they show clearly that these bodies, although the people had not yet the chance of electing these bodies, have changed, or should he say have changed in their allegiance to a Party that was running the country to ruin".

In his speech to the thousands of people gathered, de Valera referred to the war as a battle for England's trade supremacy, and stated that, "John Bull with the bible in one hand and the sword in the other has brought more ruin on this earth than any other nation". Sinn Féin speakers continuously emphasised that Sinn Féin was not a new movement, but simply a con-

tinuation of the movements led by Tone, Emmet, Davitt and Parnell in their quest for national self-determination. In Mohill, de Valera told the thousands gathered in the town that, "they try to brand this movement of ours which is as pure and good a National movement as there ever was in any country, they try to brand it as immoral".

Within eighteen months of the 1916 Rising, the surviving leaders led by Eamon de Valera had totally replaced Home Rule with republicanism as the dominant political doctrine of the people of Leitrim and Ireland. A new politics was emerging that would change the face of Ireland forever.

SNIPPET

Patrick Scott at Solas Gallery Ballinamore October 2016

Louis Mc Loughlin

SOLAS GALLERY WAS thrilled to host one of Ireland's most acclaimed artists. Patrick Scott's passing in 2014 saw the end to a sparkling career that spanned several decades culminating with his nomination of Saoi, the highest honour to be bestowed upon any living artist. The President Mary McAleese made the presentation, placing a gold torc, the symbol of the office of Saoi around his neck.

Patrick Scott was born in Kilbrittain, County Cork, in 1921, and had his first exhibition in 1944, but trained as an architect and did not become a full-time artist until 1960. He worked for fifteen years for the Irish architect Michael Scott, assisting, for example, in the design of Busáras, the central bus station in Dublin. He was also responsible for the orange livery of Irish intercity trains.



Scott was perhaps best known for his gold paintings, abstracts incorporating geometrical forms in gold leaf against a pale tempura background. He also produced tapestries and carpets.

His paintings are in several important collections including the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He won the Guggenheim Award in 1960, represented Ireland in the 1960 Venice Biennale, the Douglas Hyde Gallery held a major retrospective of his work in 1981 and the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin held a major survey in 2002. His works are distin-



guished by their purity and sense of calm, reflecting his own interest in Zen Buddhism.

Patrick Scott died on 14 February 2014 before the opening of a major retrospective at IMMA (Irish Museum of Modern Art) to be held that spring in Dublin and Carlow simultaneously. He is survived by his partner Eric Pearse.