



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

‘A guarantee to the people of Ireland’



IAN KENNEALLY
Historian and Author

It was one of the most remarkable days in Athlone’s long history, a day of marches and speeches, music and singing, cheering and laughter.

It was a day when thousands of people crowded into the centre of Athlone to witness the beginning of a new era in Irish history. It was the day when the British army departed Athlone and handed control of the military barracks to the soldiers of the new Irish state.

Changing times

During December 1921, the people of Athlone saw the first noticeable manifestations of the new reality brought about by the Anglo-Irish Treaty. In mid-December, British soldiers vacated Athlone workhouse, which they had turned into a mini-garrison. Over the following weeks, small batches of the Crown forces left Athlone almost nightly with the Black and Tans, much to the relief of locals, departing in early February 1922. These departures were part of the process that would culminate with the handover of the military barracks, then called Victoria Barracks, from British to Irish forces.

At 6am on Tuesday, February 28 1922, the remaining members of the British garrison began leaving the barracks in small detachments, subsequently departing the town by train. An hour later, the first vehicles in a convoy of over 100 lorries, Crossley tenders and Red Cross ambulances exited the barracks and drove through Athlone on their way to the Curragh. Some of the vehicles were laden with equipment while others were filled with soldiers and it was, as described in the Irish Independent, an imposing scene.

As the British army was leaving Athlone, civilians and IRA volunteers from the surrounding countryside flocked to the town. They were joined by journalists – representatives of

Irish and British newspapers – and a crew from Pathé, who would record newsreel footage of the day’s events. Among the journalists were those from the Westmeath Independent, which had resumed publication earlier that month. It had been forced to close in November 1920, following the destruction of its offices by the Crown forces, an attack in which some of the departing British soldiers had been complicit.

Past and present

By 10am, Athlone’s streets were crowded with pedestrians intermixed, as described by one contemporary, with ‘uniformed officers and men of the I.R.A. rushing hither and thither making the necessary arrangement for the big historic event...’ At 10.30 am, around 1,000 IRA volunteers mobilised at St. Mary’s Square. That number included members of what had been the Athlone Brigade of the IRA during the War of Independence, supplemented by units that had arrived the previous night from Longford and from Beggar’s Bush Barracks in Dublin. Around 100 of the men wore full uniforms and carried rifles with fixed bayonets, while all the officers carried revolvers.

Shortly after 11am, Commandant-General Seán Mac Eoin, the highest-ranking IRA officer in the region, entered Athlone barracks accompanied by some of his senior officers. They were met by a British officer, Colonel Hare, who formally handed over the barracks. At that point, the few British soldiers on guard-duty stood down, exiting the barracks a few minutes later. At the same time, IRA detachments were marching towards the barracks, accompanied by pipers and brass and reed bands.

As the leading IRA detachment marched west across the bridge, it encountered the last British soldiers who were emerging through the barrack gate. It was, as the Freeman’s Journal newspaper reported, an ‘epoch-making scene’. The brass-and-reed band abruptly ceased playing and there was a moment of silence, broken by the voice of IRA officer Patrick Morrissey, who ordered his men to allow the British troops pass over the bridge. Once the British troops had crossed the bridge, the band started playing ‘Let Erin remember the days of old’ and



General Seán MacEoin raises the Irish tricolour over Athlone Castle

Morrissey ordered his men to advance. Contemporary newspapers reported that ‘as the Irish troops crossed the bridge there was tumultuous cheering’.

A large crowd, of perhaps 10,000 people, followed the Irish troops into the barracks, with thousands more outside the walls. They were met by Seán MacEoin who, accompanied by at least one member of Cumann na mBan, stood on a car in the main square. MacEoin’s subsequent speech was widely reported by newspapers, both in Ireland and abroad. He began by welcoming his ‘fellow-soldiers and citizens of Athlone and the Midlands’. MacEoin made reference to Sergeant Custume who had died defending Athlone in 1691 and in whose honour the barracks would soon be renamed: ‘...we look back upon Athlone and we picture Sergeant Custume and the plain Volunteers making their brave struggle on that old bridge. We see them tearing plank after plank, and firing shot after shot until the last plank went down the river for ever.’ MacEoin then turned to his assembled troops, telling them that: ‘It is up to you now to maintain the high ideals of Custume and his men.’

At one point, MacEoin spoke of Athlone’s history as a garrison town. Athlone, he said, had been symbolised by ‘its barracks, its castle, and its dungeons’ for over 300 years: ‘We had hated for Athlone because it represented the symbols of British rule and the might of Britain’s armed battalions.’ He told the crowd that Athlone would instead become a symbol of an independent Ireland: ‘Athlone to-day for Ireland and for the Midlands, from this day forward shall not represent the monument of British tyranny, but it will be a guarantee to the people of Ireland of their freedom, a guarantee to enable them to live in peace, prosperity, and progress.’ Those lines, which marked the finale of MacEoin’s speech, brought loud cheers from the crowd.

The flag

The crowd’s attention now turned towards Athlone Castle, to where MacEoin and his officers headed in order to raise the Irish tricolour. They encountered a problem after discovering that the British had cut down the flagpole prior to their departure, although a replacement was

found in the form of a mast taken from a local fishing boat. Contemporary newspapers described the moment when the Irish flag was raised: ‘Amidst tremendous cheering, accompanied by the throwing of hats and caps in the air by the excited crowds below’, MacEoin ‘stood up on the ramparts of the Castle and hoisted the tri-colour’. The cheering lasted for several minutes before an IRA party stepped forward and fired three volleys into the air.

To read contemporary accounts and to look through photographs of that day is to witness a town filled with hopes and fears. The Irish Independent applauded the ‘stirring scenes in Athlone’, while the Westmeath Independent described the handover as ‘a splendid, glorious change’, proof that Ireland had ‘regained her liberty to rule, guide and direct her own actions’. Yet, the divisions caused by the Anglo-Irish Treaty could not be overlooked nor forgotten. Athlone barracks was now under the control of an independent Ireland but the same Seán MacEoin who addressed the cheering crowds of Athlone on that happy day would soon be a leader in a new conflict, a civil war.

