



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

The Irish Republican Brotherhood in Athlone



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In this edition, we explore the role played by the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in and around Athlone during the War of Independence.

This revolutionary organisation long pre-dated the Irish Republican Army (IRA), having been founded in 1858, although it was reorganised by Michael Collins, Harry Boland and others in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising. Due to its secret oath-bound nature, the IRB was condemned by the Catholic Church and viewed with suspicion by sections of Irish society. Both Éamon de Valera and Cathal Brugha, for example, distrusted the IRB and the Brotherhood was a source of tension within Dáil Éireann and the IRA.

Organising the Brotherhood

The IRB was organised into units called 'circles' and each circle was commanded by an officer called a 'centre'. This structure was designed to limit the damage that could be caused by spies and informers since each circle was, theoretically, independent of others: members of a particular cell supposedly did not know the identity of those in other cells and all communications to and from the higher echelons of the Brotherhood were funnelled through the centre.

In the decade before the War of Independence, a few individuals drove the IRB's development in and around Athlone. For example, Michael McCormack, who would later be an officer in the IRA's Drumraney Battalion, joined the IRB in 1907. He recalled that Peter Malynn (often spelled Malinn) was 'organising the I.R.B. in County Westmeath at this time'. Malynn, a shop owner in Athlone, was a prominent local Volunteer as well as a longstanding member of the IRB. He was one of a few dozen Volunteers who mobilised in the Athlone area during the 1916 Rising. Arrested by the Crown forces after the Rising, Malynn was transferred to Britain and held in Wakefield Prison near Leeds. His incarceration was widely criticised by organisations such as Athlone's urban council and that public outcry helped to hasten Malynn's release after a few months.

Seamus O'Meara, who later was O/C of the IRA's Athlone Brigade during the first phase of the War of Independence, returned to Athlone in 1917 after spending a period in Drogheda. He recalled that the Athlone circle then had 'about 18 or 20 men'. Thomas Costello, who would replace O'Meara as O/C of the Athlone Brigade in 1920, was also a member of the IRB.

He was recruited into the Brotherhood after the 1916 Rising by John McCormack from Drumraney. Costello then founded a circle in Moate before transferring to the Athlone circle in 1918. Subsequently, in his own words, he was 'soon appointed Centre for the Co. Westmeath'. Costello was replaced as centre for Westmeath by David Daly in 1919. Daly, from Moate, had joined the IRB in 1918 and he then formed a circle in the Faheran area which contained 'five or six members'. Daly, who was also an officer in the IRA's Athlone Brigade, later described his activities as the IRB's centre for Westmeath. It required, he said, 'travelling all over the county attending meetings of local circles and attending meetings in Dublin of the Leinster Council'.

'a hard core of resistance'

In 1919, the IRB relinquished, albeit conditionally, its longstanding claim to be the sole legitimate government of Ireland, amending its constitution and standing aside for the newly-formed Dáil Éireann. In August 1919, Cathal Brugha proposed that IRA volunteers take an oath of allegiance to Dáil Éireann, an action that could be seen as challenging the influence and power of the IRB. In Athlone, however, the Dáil Éireann oath was uncontroversial and seems to have been taken by most IRA volunteers. Seamus O'Meara recalled: 'The Dáil now took control of the Volunteer force and established them as the army of the Irish Republic. All ranks were now required to subscribe to an oath of allegiance to the Irish Republic. All our officers and men took this oath with very few exceptions, and anyone who did not automatically ceased to be members of the force.' In addition, according to O'Meara, most 'officers of the brigade were at this time also members of the I.R.B. and with a lead from those officers no trouble was encountered.'

O'Meara stated that 'as time went on' practically all officers of the local IRA became members of the IRB as did 'some of the men'. However, he believed that 'the organisation did not really serve any great purpose except to keep a strong backbone in the Volunteer movement'. O'Meara's description of the IRB as the spine of the IRA was



Harry Boland and Michael Collins reorganised the IRB after the 1916 Rising. Éamon de Valera, however, distrusted the organisation. (National Library of Ireland)

replicated in many contemporary accounts. Thomas Costello stated that the IRB aimed to 'fill the key positions' in the IRA: 'all members of the I.R.B. were also members' of the IRA and 'thus they acted as a backbone'. David Daly gave a similar account, saying that the Brotherhood 'formed a hard core of resistance' inside the IRA that 'would carry on the fight should the Volunteers weaken in their purpose'. Yet despite his seniority within the IRB, Daly later questioned the Brotherhood's usefulness during the War of Independence: 'It is hard to say what was really the objective of the organisation at this time...'

The Treaty

According to Henry O'Brien, an officer in the IRA's Athlone Brigade, the Athlone IRB received a boost around early 1920 when a 'big number of members were taken into the circle'. All of the new members

were IRA volunteers but this influx does not seem to have improved the circle's fortunes. O'Brien recalled that 'when things became really hot and communications became impossible, the organisation kind of faded out and became inactive'. In Westmeath, that 'really hot period' comprised the twelve months from August 1920 to July 1921. O'Brien's account was echoed by Seamus O'Meara, who asserted that 'during the period of the Black and Tans, the I.R.B. organisation became inactive and may be said to have practically ceased to exist'.

During that period, Peter Malynn was, once again, the centre of the Athlone circle but, despite his status among local republicans, he seems to have achieved little in the role. Frank O'Connor, a Coosan-based officer in the IRA, recalled that he 'took Malinn's place at a later date when he was considered not to be

active enough'. It is not clear when this changeover occurred, although Seamus O'Meara believed that Malynn remained centre 'until the Truce' of July 1921. The IRB was revived in Westmeath after the Truce since, freed from the danger of disruption by the Crown forces, it was again able to hold regular meetings.

The IRB's revival lasted until the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty on 6 December 1921. Days later, the IRB's supreme council met to discuss the ramifications of what had occurred in London. Although most of the Brotherhood's leadership backed the Treaty, the organisation quickly split on the issue. In the Athlone area, the IRB was similarly divided with longstanding local members such as David Daly opposing the Treaty and Seán Hurley supporting it. Such divisions meant that the IRB ceased to function as a national organisation after February 1922.

