



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Peace and War: Athlone and the Anglo-Irish Treaty



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The period between July 1921 and February 1922 was a time of hope and tension for the people of Athlone - the Truce of July 1921 between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and British Crown forces was welcomed by the population of the town, not least because it brought an end, albeit perhaps temporarily, to reprisals and ambushes.

The *Westmeath Examiner*, in comments that were echoed by many newspapers and public bodies, wished Eamon de Valera well in his forthcoming peace conference with David Lloyd George, the British prime minister.

The paper continued: 'Force has had its trial now on both sides and it must be the fervent hope of every lover of peace and good-will as well as every advocate of freedom that this long drawn-out quarrel between two nations may be brought to a conclusion on principles productive of lasting peace and reconciliation...'

Waiting and preparing

Over the following months, the people of Athlone went about their business and watched as the negotiations continued in London. In the town and its vicinity, the IRA, which was now free to operate in the open, continued to recruit and drill, all the time watched by the Crown forces. This new situation, in which two opposing forces patrolled the town, led to scenes that would once have been unthinkable.

In August 1921, the IRA and the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) worked together after Lyster's sawmill in Athlone caught fire. Although they were unable to save the building, which was in the vicinity of High Street and Excise Street, their combined efforts prevented the flames from spreading to adjoining buildings.

A few weeks later, when Seán Mac Eoin and Harry Boland made a brief visit to Athlone's Prince of Wales Hotel, an estimated 2,000 people gathered outside the building seeking

autographs and handshakes. Among the crowd, according to the *Freeman's Journal* newspaper, were two English soldiers to whom MacEoin supplied his autograph, prefaced with the words: 'To friendly Englishmen'.

These were relatively isolated examples of goodwill between the opposing forces. The outcome of the London negotiations was yet to be determined and a renewal of warfare was still possible. On a few occasions, the IRA and the RIC came close to conflict as both forces sought to carry out police work in the town. British soldiers stationed in Athlone barracks and the town's workhouse were particularly unnerved by the changed circumstances in which they found themselves and, seemingly fearful of surprise attacks, they resorted to harassing locals.

While the Crown forces were nervous, republicans were increasingly assertive. Not only was the IRA acting as a police force but the *Dáil Éireann* courts, which had previously been disrupted by the Crown forces, began sitting again. One of the largest demonstrations of republican activity was seen in August 1921 with the funeral of Bernard Gaffey, a local IRA officer who died as a result of injuries received earlier in the year at the hands of the Crown forces.

Gaffey's funeral brought a huge crowd to Athlone and prominent among the mourners were members of the IRA's Athlone Brigade and the local branch of *Cumann na mBan*. Contemporary newspapers reported that over 7,000 people gathered in the town and the cortege, which proceeded to Drum cemetery after requiem mass in St Peter's Church, was over three miles in length.

A treaty is signed

The Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed on December 6 1921. That same week, Seán Mac Eoin was appointed commander of the local IRA as part of a nationwide restructuring. As the highest-ranking IRA officer in the area, his strong support for the Treaty was widely noticed and commented upon.

There were other indications of local support for the agreement, including a 'Solemn Benediction at St. Peter's Church in thanksgiving for the blessings of peace', while newspapers reported that bonfires could be seen on



British crown forces hold a road-block on the bridge of Athlone, around 1921. After the ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in January 1922, those forces began to depart Athlone. (Photo: Athlone Public Library)

hills in rural areas.

In Moate, the local Sinn Féin club soon signalled its support for the agreement while Athlone's Urban District Council issued a public notice calling on 'the representatives for the Counties Roscommon and Westmeath to support and vote for the Treaty, as by so doing they will be carrying out the wishes of the overwhelming bulk of their constituents'.

During December 1921, the people of Athlone saw the first noticeable manifestations of the new political reality brought about by the Treaty. In mid-December, the British soldiers vacated Athlone workhouse, which they had occupied since 1913.

Elsewhere in the town, the British army was confined to barracks as it made preparations to leave Ireland. 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 from British to Irish forces.

A new conflict?

The Treaty was ratified by *Dáil*

Éireann on the January 7 1922: sixty-four votes for and fifty-seven against. The *Westmeath Independent*, whose Athlone office had been burned down by the Crown forces in November 1920, began republishing a few weeks after the Treaty vote. The paper, still owned by the Chapman family, was now edited by Cathail Ó Tuathail, an experienced journalist, GAA official and proponent of the Irish language.

Under Ó Tuathail, the paper was an avid supporter of the Treaty, which it saw as 'evidence of victory' over Britain. The paper directed a warning to those who opposed the agreement: 'Civil War! Who wants it? Have we not suffered enough, sacrificed enough, fought enough? For God's sake, let us strain every nerve to avoid the chaos, the misery, the desolation which war among ourselves would bring in its train.'

By then, it was apparent that there was widespread opposition to the Treaty among IRA brigades in Munster and Dublin, with units elsewhere across Ireland increasingly divided on the issue. Despite the tension, both pro and anti-Treaty sides could still meet in Athlone.

In early February 1922, the Athlone

Brigade of the IRA and the local branch of *Cumann na mBan* mobilised in the town to commemorate James Tormey's death. Tormey, from Moate, was a leading officer in the local IRA who had commanded the Athlone Brigade's flying column. He had been killed in a gunfight with Black and Tans at Cornafulla, County Roscommon, twelve months earlier.

On that February 1922 morning, over 1,000 IRA volunteers assembled in Athlone's Fair Green before marching to St Peter's Church, accompanied by the town's brass and reed band. Contemporary newspapers reported that 'large crowds of townspeople turned out, many walking along the side walks with the procession and the others lined along the route'.

After the Mass, the cortege travelled to Cornafulla, where IRA officer George Adamson unveiled a cross inscribed in Tormey's honour. The commemoration of Tormey's death was a moment of unity and a moment of remembrance for a comrade. Yet that unity was transitory and the fault lines of a new conflict were becoming clearer by the day. Athlone, as with Ireland, would soon be in the midst of a civil war.

