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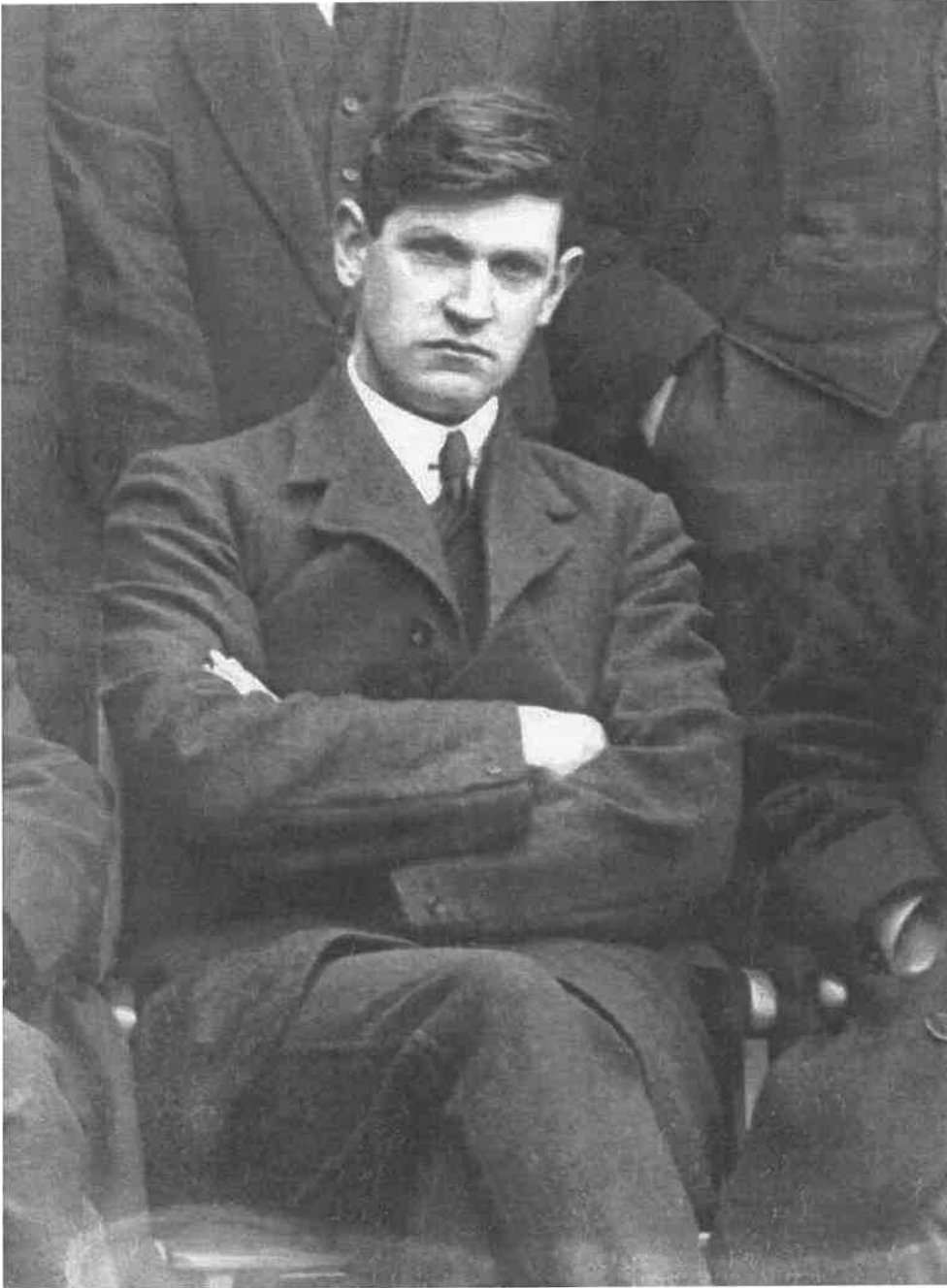
The IRB in Westmeath during the War of Independence – Part 2

In this, the second of two articles, we continue our discussion of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in Westmeath after the Easter Rising and during the War of Independence.

In 1919, the I.R.B. relinquished, albeit conditionally, its longstanding claim to be the government of Ireland, amending its constitution and standing aside for the newly-formed Dáil Éireann. Thomas Costello, who was centre for County Westmeath at the time (and who later became O/C of the IRA's Athlone Brigade), described the outcome of the Dublin meeting at which the Brotherhood agreed its new policy: '...the powers of the I.R.B. as the government of the country would be transferred to the Dáil on condition that the Dáil carried out the programme of the Brotherhood to the full letter of the law; and, in case of the Dáil not doing so, the Dáil would automatically cease to be the government of the country, the functions of which would again revert to the I.R.B.'

Tension and distrust

Despite its new policy, the IRB had many opponents within the IRA, Sinn Féin and Dáil Éireann. One of the most prominent was Cathal Brugha, minister for defence and a former member of the Brotherhood. Brugha had quit the IRB after the 1916 Rising, believing that secret societies should have no place within republicanism. Subsequently, his antagonism towards the IRB became entangled with his dislike of the Brotherhood's most renowned figure, Michael Collins.



Michael Collins was president of the Irish Republican Brotherhood's supreme council during the negotiation of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921.

In August 1919, Brugha proposed that IRA volunteers should take an oath of allegiance to Dáil Éireann, an action that could be seen as challenging the influence and power of the IRB. In Westmeath, however, the Dáil Éireann oath was uncontroversial and seems to have been taken by most IRA volunteers with the support of local IRB commanders. Seamus O'Meara, then O/C of the IRA's Athlone Brigade, 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. Nearly all the 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.'

There is little evidence of the IRB being a source of tension within Westmeath, although one prominent member of the Mullingar Brigade, John Macken, said of the Brotherhood: 'I am at a loss still to understand what real purpose the organisation served at this stage when we had an oath bound Volunteer force. To my mind it only led to dissension, as the ordinary Volunteers who were not members must have wondered what was going on behind their backs by what appeared to be a chosen few'. Macken's comments do tally with accounts from other counties. After 1916, as the historian Michael Hopkinson noted, the IRB 'formed an elite within the expanding Volunteers and often caused tensions and divided loyalties', highlighting examples in Cork, Limerick and Tipperary.

Yet such divisions are not, with the exception of Macken's account, apparent in the recollections of Westmeath-based IRA volunteers. Others in the county may have dismissed the Brotherhood as unimportant or ineffectual but they did not portray it as a source of disunity. Perhaps this was because the county's two IRA brigades were formed around a very small group of like-minded officers and there was a high correlation between those who were active members of the IRA, members of the Athlone Brigade's flying column and members of the IRB.

Directing activities?

Another possible reason for the IRB's unimportance in Westmeath during the War of Independence was its relative lack of activity in the county. Seamus O'Meara, for example, stated that 'there never was, at any time, any attempt to direct Volunteer activities by the I.R.B. in the area'. O'Meara may have been correct in this statement, since there is little evidence to suggest otherwise. There are only a few examples in which the IRB, perhaps, directed IRA activity in Westmeath.

According to Seamus Maguire, Patrick McCabe (then O/C of the Mullingar Brigade) met with brigade officers in October 1920 at a time when Terence MacSwiney was

about to die'. McCabe informed the officers that 'an order was issued that the worst R.I.C. men in each district was to be shot'. The order, in Maguire's version of events, 'came from the I.R.B. and also from Volunteer Headquarters'. McCabe was a member of the IRB, having joined the organisation early in 1920 (Joe Kennedy of Castlepollard enlisted him into the Brotherhood). In his witness statement, McCabe mentioned an order 'that one or two policemen were to be shot in each area', although, unlike Maguire, he does not say that the IRB had issued the order. Whatever its origins, this order seems to have been ignored, although Maguire suggested that they 'should shoot an R.I.C. man in Castlepollard, named Lynch'. Instead, the Mullingar Brigade would kidnap Resident Magistrate Maxell Moore and Justice of the Peace Gustavus Hyde in the middle of October 1920: an event that, as we discussed in two earlier blog posts, resulted in the Crown forces carrying out mass arrests and causing grave damage to the IRA in the area.

The Mullingar area provided another example of IRB activity. James Hynes, who worked as clerk in Mullingar post office from November 1915 onwards, joined the Volunteers at a later date, probably during 1918. However, he attended only a couple of Volunteer gatherings when he was approached by David Burke, a local republican and member of the IRB. Burke convinced Hynes to 'go underground and do intelligence work'. Hynes, who was then initiated into the IRB, quit the Volunteers and seems to have dealt exclusively with Burke during the War of Independence. Hynes deciphered British army and police communications that passed through Mullingar post office and he then handed the information to Burke.

Burke, along with Ned Whelehan, a prominent local Volunteer, were the leading IRB officers in the IRA's Mullingar Brigade area at that time. For example, Michael McCoy, an officer in the Mullingar Brigade, was a member of the same circle as Hynes. McCoy later stated that he was approached to join the Mullingar circle by Burke and Whelehan, saying that Burke had been 'a member of the I.R.B. in Dublin, where he had worked for some time prior to returning to Mullingar after 1916' whereas Whelehan had worked in Liverpool and 'was a member there before his return to Mullingar at the end of 1915'.

Despite the efforts of Burke and others, the IRB in the Mullingar Brigade area was – as with its counterpart in the Athlone area (discussed in the first article) – effectively out of action for much of the War of Independence, with members incarcerated by the Crown forces and circles unable to hold meetings. In April 1921, for example, David Daly, IRA officer and IRB centre for County Westmeath (after replacing Thomas Costello as county centre in 1919), received orders from the Athlone Brigade to 'proceed to the Mullingar Brigade area'. His mission was 'to get I.R.A. actively going in that area in order to try and draw off the enemy pressure on ours, and secondly to reorganise the I.R.B. which, apparently, had lapsed in that area'. Daly was unable to carry out these orders since he was captured by Black and Tans while approaching Mullingar. He did, however, manage to hide a number of documents, including a list of IRB members in the Mullingar area, before his capture.

Truce to Treaty

According to Henry O'Brien, an officer in the Athlone Brigade, the IRB was revived in Westmeath after the Truce. Freed from the danger of disruption by the Crown forces, the Brotherhood was again able to hold regular meetings and to enlist new members. Apart from meetings, it is not clear if the IRB undertook any other actions in the county during this time. It is likely, however, that county centres passed information on local events and opinions up the chain of command. During the Treaty negotiations, Michael Collins, who was then also president of the IRB's supreme council, maintained close contact with fellow council members. He kept the IRB leadership informed of developments and they kept him informed of attitudes within the Brotherhood, especially as the negotiations neared their culmination.

The Treaty was signed on 6 December 1921 and the IRB's supreme council met days later to discuss the ramifications of what had occurred in London. On 12 December, the council, eleven of whom supported the Treaty with four opposing it, issued a note to centres around the country stating that the agreement should be ratified. Support for the Treaty was driven by Collins and others such as Seán Mac Eoin. However, council members such as Liam Lynch and Florence O'Donoghue opposed the agreement. The supreme council attempted to accommodate the opposing opinions in its memo to IRB circles. The memo advocated ratification of the Treaty but allowed Brotherhood members who 'have to take public action as representatives', such as TDs in Dáil Éireann, 'freedom of action in the matter'. A month later, after the Treaty had been ratified by Dáil Éireann, the supreme council met again but it was, by then, utterly divided and incapable of offering an agreed position on the Treaty.

Thomas Costello criticised the supreme council's equivocations, saying that 'the weakness of what was originally a very strong organisation came to light when it issued its memo, or instruction to its members on their attitude to the Treaty'. His comments were echoed by John Macken of the Mullingar Brigade: 'When the Treaty with England was signed, the I.R.B. executive failed hopelessly to give any definite lead to its members.' Indeed, as noted by historians such as John O'Beirne-Ranelagh, the IRB ceased to function as a national organisation after February 1922. In Westmeath, the IRB split with longstanding members such as David Daly opposing the Treaty and Seán Hurley supporting it.

Perhaps the most tangible example of IRB influence Westmeath during this period can be seen in the case of Seán Mac Eoin, the Longford IRA commander who was admitted to the Brotherhood's supreme council in late 1920. Mac Eoin's position as a senior IRA officer and IRB member was, as we have seen in the example of Westmeath, very common. In 1921, eleven of the thirteen staff officers in IRA GHQ, including Chief of Staff Richard Mulcahy, were members of the IRB and four of those were on the Brotherhood's supreme council. In December 1921, at the same time as the Treaty was being considered and debated, Mac Eoin was appointed commander of the IRA in Westmeath and the wider region. As the highest-ranking IRA officer in the area, his advocacy on behalf of the Treaty and his strong support for Michael Collins was widely noticed and commented upon locally. During the Civil War, Mac Eoin would be appointed General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the Western Command in the Provisional Government Army and become an important leader in its campaign against the anti-Treaty IRA.

Sources

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