

Alexander 'Baby' Gray (1858-1916) and the battle at Ashbourne, 28 April 1916.

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Introduction

Alexander Gray was born in County Tyrone in October 1858. His father, the Reverend Alexander Gray, was a Presbyterian minister who lived in Aghaloo, Lismulladown.¹ In 1880, the young Alexander entered the Royal Irish Constabulary cadet school in the Phoenix Park, Dublin to train as a police officer. Like his fellow candidates for the cadetship, he had to be aged between twenty-one and twenty-six, be unmarried (members of the RIC had to have seven years service before they could marry), be at least five feet five inches tall and of good health: 'free from any physical defect of body, impediment of speech, defect of sight or hearing, disposition to constitutional or hereditary disease, well developed'.² He had to receive certificates of good moral character from two clergymen or two magistrates of the county in which he was resident, before going to Dublin Castle to sit a competitive examination in subjects including arithmetic, orthography, English composition, geography, British history, Latin, the law of evidence and the elementary principles of law. Then it was off to the training depot in the Phoenix Park. A cadetship was a preliminary step to the rank of sub-inspector to which qualified cadets succeeded as vacancies arose.³ Gray graduated from the RIC cadet school on 22 March 1882 at the age of twenty-three. The following January, he received his first posting as a 3rd sub-inspector to Dingle in County Kerry. By 1887, he had reached the position of district inspector of the area.⁴

Little has been written about individual members of the RIC such as Alexander Gray and he probably would have remained another largely anonymous figure except for the fact that he was immortalised by Peig Sayers in her autobiography simply entitled *Peig* and, therefore, became known to generations of Leaving Certificate students in Ireland.⁵ He is the protagonist in one of the most dramatic events described by Peig as she recalled the Land

War days of the 1880s in the town of Dingle where in 1887, as a fourteen-year-old, she was placed in service in the home of Seamus Curran, a local publican.

i. Peig Sayers' memories of 'Baby Gray'.

The Land War that began in the west of Ireland in the summer of 1879 did not extend its way to Kerry until September 1880 when the first branch of the Land League was founded in Tralee.⁶ Thereafter, Kerry became one of the most disturbed counties in Ireland and was to remain so throughout most of the 1880s. Peig's own analysis of the Land War in West Kerry is a rather simplistic one, but it is also a traditional one in that it captures the sense of grievance felt by tenants at that time and echoes the growth of hostility towards landlords that characterised the years after 1879. She says:

San am sin bhí Ceist na Talún ag suaitheadh na tíre i ngach aon bhall, is bhí na tiarnaí go bagrach. Chaithfidís cíós nó a gcuid féin a fháil. Mura mbeadh an cíós le fáil, chaithfí an tionónta go mi-thrócaireach amach.⁷ [At that time the whole country was affected by the land question and landlords were threatening in their behaviour. They demanded their rents or else the property of the tenants. If they did not get their rents, the tenants were mercilessly evicted.]

However, the evidence suggests that the tenantry on the estate of Lord Ventry, which encompassed most of the Dingle peninsula, had not been rack-rented in the past. Rent levels on the estate were actually quite moderate in the post-Famine period but they had been raised in the mid 1870s to, in Ventry's own words, 'a considerable extent'.⁸ This increase was during a period of economic growth at a time when Ventry was spending heavily on the improvement of his estate. It is possible that many of his tenants, particularly the larger ones, did not find their rents to be too exorbitant in the immediate aftermath of the increase. However as J.S. Donnelly has concluded:

When the Land War erupted in Kerry beginning in late 1880, these recent increases of rent, often combined with the resentment of a poor population

slow to change its accustomed patterns of life against zealously progressive and wealthy landlords, furnished powerful motives for a fervid agitation punctuated by sensational violence.⁹

There is no doubt but that the Dingle area to which Gray was posted in 1883 had been extremely affected by agitation in the three years or so prior to his arrival. In fact, by late 1880 the area had become so disturbed that a special military detachment had to be sent there to quell agitation that took a variety of forms including cattle driving, rioting on the streets of Dingle, arson, the sending of threatening letters, assaults on both property and persons, and perhaps the most potent of Land League weapons - boycotting.¹⁰ When agitation remained extreme during 1881, the British gunboat *HMS Britomart* was sent to Dingle 'to have a moral effect'.¹¹ But the *Britomart* had no more effect than the local police and so conditions remained anarchical in the area in 1882.¹² However, around the time that Gray arrived in early 1883, the economy was beginning to show signs of recovery and the enforced abatements granted by the local landlords had helped to reduce to some extent the levels of agitation. The economic upturn was not to last and when the economy crashed once again after 1884, there was another dramatic increase in agrarian crime levels. This increase coincided with the establishment of the Plan of Campaign on the Ventry estate.

The National League, responsible for the organisation of the Plan of Campaign, was established in the Dingle area in May 1885. The police reported that there were more outrages committed in the area during that month than for the whole of the previous two years.¹³ In accordance with the Plan, tenants on the Ventry estate refused to pay their rents after their calls for a reduction of 30 per cent or so had been refused and they lodged them instead into the Plan's funds. Lord Ventry responded rather predictably through evictions. Forty families were evicted in the Dingle area from May to September 1885.¹⁴ Some of the police authorities in the area were in sympathy with the plight of the local tenants and pointed out to their superiors that they were genuinely unable to pay their rents as a result of the 'wretched prices for cattle on which they have in a great measure to

depend'.¹⁵ However, Gray was much less sympathetic. He did not believe there was a scarcity of money amongst the tenant farmers. In his report for January 1886, he wrote: 'There has been more drunkenness amongst the farmers of the county during the past six months than there was for a period of two years immediately preceding'. He cited as evidence the fact that 'there were fifteen drunk men in the lock up her (sic) last night [29 January], thirteen of whom were farmers from the west of Dingle'. Gray claimed that 'the principal office-bearers of the [National] League here are bankrupt publicans & needy shopkeepers; it is their interest of course that the landlord should get no rent, and they have used their power effectively for their own advantage'.¹⁶ There may have been much truth in Gray's analysis. While there is still some room for debate, historians generally agree that the agricultural crises of the late 1870s and 1880s created the conditions for agrarian revolt. James S. Donnelly Jr. has argued that the prolonged economic crisis brought about a 'revolution of rising expectations' whereby tenants who had prospered since the 1850s were not prepared to relinquish their economic gains.¹⁷ Samuel Clark points to the fact that a challenging collectivity emerged from the late 1870s, made possible by the structural changes in the post-Famine agrarian economy in which the rural-based tenant farmers formed a strong alliance with urban-based shopkeepers and publicans.¹⁸ Shopkeepers and publicans had benefited from tenant prosperity in the post-Famine period, while many tenant farmers had become financially obligated to them because of the network of credit facilities that had grown from the 1850s. As a result of this new social alliance, strengthened by the influence of a strong Nationalist parliamentary party and the early support of many Fenians, it became inevitable that local aspiring political leaders (many of whom were urban-based middle class Catholic merchants) would vilify landlords as rack-renters in order to strengthen their own position.¹⁹

By July 1885, boycotting in the Dingle area, according to police reports, was 'practised with great severity' on all those who refused to conform to the rules of the National League.²⁰ In September, seventeen houses in the area were visited by parties of so-called 'Moonlighters' who demanded money and arms. By December, the

police were reporting that 'boycotters can do pretty much as they like, for, owing to the relentless vengeance of the League on those who have attempted to give information to the police ... [it is] impossible to grapple with the culprits'. John Mason, Lord Ventry's sub-agent in the Dingle area was boycotted for taking the grazing lands of a number of evicted tenants (which he was eventually forced to give up.) Local Protestant merchants whose sympathies lay with the authorities rather than the National League were also targeted. William Collier, for example, could not get anybody to shoe his horses. Atkins' shop was boycotted and so was anybody who frequented it. In January 1886, Gray was infuriated that a Mr. Watson was being boycotted. He wrote: 'Some zealous patriot remembered that he saw Mr. Watson going into Atkins' shop about a month ago'. Watkins subsequently had to apologise at a public meeting organised by the National League.²¹ Gray wrote:

There was no alternative and this man, loathing the principles, and despising the wretched blacklegs that compose this branch of the National League was compelled to appear before them and say, 'I am sorry gentlemen (?) for what I have done but if you overlook my, fault this time I promise not to err for the future. How disgusting!.

He continued in his own inimitable fashion:

So powerful has become this anarchial (sic) conspiracy, which is slowly but surely sapping the foundations of social order and even breaking the fetters of moral obligations, that if some steps be not taken to curb & fetter its galloping growth, those who refuse to run along with it will be ground beneath the heel of an iron and merciless tyranny.²²

There were tit-for-tat reprisals on either side. In April of 1886, the Rev. John Fleming evicted the secretary of the National League from a house that he owned in Dingle. Fleming was subsequently boycotted and when his wife died a short time after, he was unable to procure a carriage in Dingle to allow him to follow the remains

to Killarney.²³ The local police were completely frustrated by the lack of resources and the fact that 'open enmity & disrespect [was] shown to the representatives of law and order'. Gray asked of his superiors: 'How can things be expected to mend when such utterly monstrous & illegal proceedings are allowed to be carried on with impunity?'²⁴ Atrocities continued during 1886. Giles Rae, a process server from Castlegregory, had his ear cut off by Moonlighters in January.²⁵ Gray was uncompromising in his attitude to those involved in such atrocities. Subsequently, there were many complaints made against the conduct of the police in Dingle throughout the period 1885 to 1887.²⁶

One of the most serious of these complaints was lodged in July 1886. The previous spring, Lord Ventry had been ousted as chairman of the Dingle Board of Poor Law Guardians when Nationalists targeted this local government body as a means of asserting their political power. Ventry's resentment spawned another round of local evictions.²⁷ His anger was intensified when he was replaced as chairman by a Dingle hotelier, John Lee, a prominent member of the National League.²⁸ Shortly afterwards, Lee began to complain that a conspiracy had been put into place and that he was being victimised by the RIC (presumably reference to continued police raids on his licensed premises) because he refused to supply cars to the police and bailiffs involved in local evictions. At the beginning of July 1886, the *Cork Examiner* reported:

We have before had occasion to refer to the party of police in Dingle as exceedingly ill-directed and officious. The sooner the police authorities take steps to change entirely the character of the force in that place the less likelihood there will be of a collision which nothing but the extremely peaceable disposition of the people has hitherto prevented.²⁹

Later that month, Lee wrote to the chief secretary John Morley:

I desire to say that I have been made the object of a most determined persecution at the hands of the police, at the instance I believe of District Inspector Gray of this town who with his

subordinates H[ea]d Constable Griffin and S[er]g[ean]t Moran have shown a disposition to injure me in my character and business... the only reason I can assign for it is that he [Gray] is at the head of a little Orange clique in the town.³⁰

Official enquiries were subsequently made into Gray's alleged behaviour 'towards the Nationalists of Dingle' but the authorities found that there were 'no grounds for charges against Gray'; instead Lee was blamed for 'inciting people to outrage and intimidation'.³¹ In fact, what Lee had done was to refuse an eviction party that was chosen to carry out evictions on Lord Cork's property in the area the use of his stables to house the sheriff's cars and, in Gray's own words, he did so in 'the most determined & insulting manner'.³² While Gray attracted controversy of this type, he had a proclivity towards dealing with it; he refused to be in any way disorientated by accusations against him or his subordinates (whether they were true or not.) He wrote to the inspector general of the RIC (probably around the end of July 1886) that the allegations made against him by Lee were as a result of

pure personal malice against me.... I have never, either directly or indirectly, given instructions with regard to the supervision of this man's house and I simply deny that he has been subjected to the smallest persecution. His house is visited by the police reasonably.... Surely it is not persecution to enforce the provisions of the Licensing Acts. There is no Orange clique in Dingle, I am and never was imbued with Orange proclivities, and I cannot call to my aid words sufficiently strong to emphasise my negation of this miserably vindictive statement.³³

It is probable that this round of accusations and counter-accusations prompted the tale about 'Baby Gray' (a nickname he got presumably because of his boyish looks) that appears in *Peig*. It certainly did not occur on the date designated to it by Peig because according to her, she was seventeen years old when the affray took

place, which would mean that it was some time in 1890. At that stage, Alexander 'Baby' Gray was, in fact, no longer stationed in Dingle, having been transferred to Killarney in June 1889. It is more likely that the riot took place on 8 November 1887, her first year in service and shortly before the National League was prohibited in Kerry.³⁴ Peig's memoirs accurately highlight the strained relations that existed between the police and local people in the town of Dingle and they also highlight the fact that this was largely because of the RIC's involvement in local evictions.³⁵ Seamus Curran, her employer, told Peig one day:

*Tá cuid de lucht na tuaithe is níl siad geal do na póilíní; is ní ceart go mbeidís mar is míthrócaireach a chaitheadar amach an bhaintreach bhocht dhealbh agus a cúigear dílleachtaí an lá fé dheireadh.*³⁶ [Many of the country people have no respect for the police; and rightly so because the other day they mercilessly evicted a poor widow and her five children.]

According to Peig, the brother of the evicted widow referred to in the above quotation swore that he would get revenge on the police. One evening, he and a number of others began an affray in a local public house (possibly Lee's hotel), as a pretext to lure the police into their midst. The decoy worked and very soon an ugly riot had broken out between the police and people who had gathered for the fair. It is then that Peig introduces us to Alexander 'Baby' Gray:

Ní mór an mhoill a bhí ar an D[istrict].I[nspector]. é féin a ullmhú. Bhuaile sé an Droichead Beag aniar ar chairiún dubh a raibh geall bhán ina éadan. Chomh luath is a tháinig sé go dtí an Droichead Beag, shéid sé adharc, ach má shéid, sin é an uair d'éirigh an liúireach go léir ón slua thuas. D'fhéachas féin i dtreo an Droichid Bhig, is bhí sé an tsráid aníos san am sin - fear óg misniúil, déanta suas ina chuid arm, ag marcaíocht ar an gchairiún dubh. Bhí fuinneamh agus fiántas ina radharc, is níor mhaith an dóichín don mhuintir thuas é. Bhí sleá fhada nimhe ar

thosach an chapail aige is ba dhóigh leat gurbh é an Seanbhuachaill féin a bhí ann ar an gceol agus ar an bhfothram a bhí ag na cloigíní a bhí ar an gcapall sin a dhéanamh. Ghabh se tharam an tsráid suas, is go deimhin ní raibh aon fhuadar fóna fé. Shéid sé an adharc arís, is a Dhia na bhFeart! sin é an uair a bhí scaipeadh na mion-éan orthu. I gceann cúig nóimeat ní raibh Críostaí mhic an Luain le feiscint ar an tsráid, ach amháin triúr de lucht na brúine a bhí gafa ag na póilíní. Ghabh an marcach síos suas an tsráid fé dhó, ach is maith an té nach gcuirfeadh sé sceon air...

Nuair a bhí gach ní chun suaimhnis d'fhiafraíos féin de Shéamas cérbh é fear an chapail.

'Sin é "Baby" Gray, an D.I.', ar seisean.³⁷

[The d[istrict] i[nspector] did not delay in getting ready. He came across the little bridge on a black horse which had a white star on its forehead. As soon as he got to the bridge, he blew a horn, but when he did, a huge roar erupted from the crowd. I looked towards the bridge and saw this young brave man, dressed in uniform, riding on a black horse. There was bravery and a fierce anger in his eyes, which did not augur well for the crowd above on the street. He had a long lance in his hand and you would think from the sight of him and the music of the little bells and the noise of his horse's hooves that it was the devil himself. As he passed me going towards the crowd, it was clear that he had only one purpose in mind. He blew the horn again and this time there was a massive scattering of people. Within five minutes there was not a single person to be seen on the street, except three men who had been collared by the police. The rider went up and down the street a couple of times, and it would have been a brave man who would not have been afraid of him.

When peace had been restored, I asked Seamus who was the man on the horse. 'That's "Baby" Gray, the d[istrict] i[n]spector', he replied.]

After her description of the Dingle affray, Peig went on: '*Is minic ina dhiaidh sin a chonaic mé é. Bhí aithne mhaith agam air, is nach mé a chuimhnigh ar lá na brúine nuair a chuala ina dhiaidh sin gur thit "Baby" Gray is a lucht leanúna le láimh Thomáis Ághas ag Ashbourne.*'³⁸ [I often saw him afterwards. I knew him well, and I thought of the riot that day when I heard years later [in 1916] that 'Baby' Gray had been killed in an ambush at Ashbourne which had been organised by Thomas Ashe and his followers.] Ironically, the leader of the Volunteers at Ashbourne on that fateful day, Thomas Ashe, had been born in the Dingle area of Kerry, in the small townland of Kinard, in 1885. Undoubtedly he would have heard of Gray in his youth. In fact, in his biography of Ashe, Seán Ó Lúing later wrote: 'In the years of the land revolution Gray had been District Inspector in Dingle area where he became notorious for his acts of repression on behalf of the local landlords.'³⁹ But it was merely a historical coincidence that brought both men together on 28 April 1916.

ii. County Inspector of Meath, 1912-16.

In June 1889, Gray was transferred from Dingle to Killarney. There he remained for twenty months before being moved to Raphoe in Donegal in February 1891. His stay in Raphoe was a short one; in April of the same year he moved to Lurgan in County Armagh. In December 1894, he married Helen Stewart and that same month, he was granted 'good service pay' of £12 per annum. In September 1896, Gray was again promoted, this time to first rank district inspector and moved to Dublin. There he stayed until April 1902 when he was moved to Roscommon. He stayed less than a year there before moving to Naas in County Kildare where he remained between May 1903 and October 1906. In the latter month he was promoted to county inspector and was posted to Lisburn in County Antrim. He stayed there only two months; his brief sojourn was probably related to the fact that his wife had close relatives in that county and members of the RIC were not expected to serve in

counties where they had close family ties.⁴⁰ He was posted in three other areas prior to his move to Meath, but unfortunately his RIC file has been partially damaged and it is, therefore, difficult to trace their location. However, according to *The Meath Chronicle*, he had served in both Westmeath and Down before his arrival in Meath as county inspector in June 1912.⁴¹

The character that arrived in Meath seems to have been very different from the one who left Dingle. Of course, he was twenty years older, more mature, experienced and mellowed. And circumstances had also greatly changed. The country was now largely free from agrarian agitation and the political climate was one of expectation as Nationalists prepared for the introduction of a third Home Rule Bill.⁴² Gray's monthly report for May 1912, for example, shows that there were only five outrages of a minor nature committed in the county that month and of these none was of an agrarian nature. There were no rent troubles and no evictions. The estate of Dominick More O'Ferall had just been sold to the tenants under the terms of the 1909 Land Act.⁴³ While the United Irish League was well established and fairly active in the county, Gray did not regard it as a serious threat to the maintenance of law and order. His monthly reports for 1912 generally paint the picture of a peaceful county and frequently contained remarks such as: 'Nothing calling for particular attention occurred during the month'; 'the good feeling between landlords and tenants continues'; 'the general condition of the county continues satisfactory' and so on.

However, by September 1912, as the third Home Rule crisis gathered momentum, with the Unionists of Ulster preparing to oppose it, there were signs that the peace of the county was threatened. After a Home Rule meeting at Kells, a number of cattle belonging to a local Protestant landowner were maimed as it was reported that he had attended the Bonar Law demonstration in Belfast some time previously. But, in general, the farmers of Meath were more concerned about the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in September 1912 because of the large number of fat and store cattle in the county.⁴⁴ In his report for February 1913, Gray pointed

out that 'the passing of the Home Rule Bill does not appear to have aroused any enthusiasm', adding that 'the cattle trade is of paramount importance in this county'.⁴⁵

It was not until the spring of 1914 that Gray began to report upon the establishment and activities of the Irish National Volunteers. In March he reported that a branch had been formed at Athboy made up of around 150 young men. In April, two more branches were formed in the Kells area: 'this is the only change in the organization for agitation'.⁴⁶ By May 1914, there were twelve branches in the county with an estimated membership of 1,300 men. According to Gray:

the persons joining are a few farmers and farmers' sons, labourers and publicans' assistants. Labourers predominate generally. So far it cannot be said that all sections of Nationalists are supporting the movement as farmers generally and respectable shopkeepers appear to be indifferent. On the other hand there is no active opposition. The same may be said of the R[oman] C[atholic] clergy, only two priests having expressed approval of the movement.⁴⁷

The following month Gray reported a change in the movement, which by then overshadowed all others in the county. He claimed that since John Redmond 'annexed the organisation' all classes of Nationalists, including the Catholic clergy, supported it. James Quigley, the county surveyor, was the leader of the Volunteers in the county: 'He is really the most important person connected with the movement as he has under his control all the men employed under the Co[unty] Council under the direct labour scheme'. Gray did not think that the members of the movement 'quite know the objects of it, but undoubtedly they are inclined towards sedition & disloyalty'.⁴⁸ In July, he reported that 'the organisations for agitation appear to have merged into the Volunteer movement', stimulus having been given to it by the Howth gun-running, so that then 'many respectable young men' who had held aloof in the past now joined. Rather prophetically, Gray pronounced that 'the hope that

the opportunity of striking a blow against England when involved in war may present itself sooner or later' was something aspired to by its members.⁴⁹ By now there were sixty-one branches of the organization in the county with a total membership of almost 5,600.⁵⁰ Following the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914, Gray was sceptical of John Redmond's speech pledging the support of the Volunteers to the war effort and felt that local Unionists, who were now joining the Volunteers, would soon withdraw when they realised its 'ulterior motives'. He expressed the opinion that there was 'unanimous feeling against the Germans' but only because they were the lesser of two evils. If it was France that was fighting the British: 'there would be no such anxiety to defend the coasts of Ireland.'⁵¹

Initially, local Meath Unionists such as Lord Fingall and Lord Gormanston had joined the Volunteers in the aftermath of Redmond's speech but as Gray had prophesised these Unionists had withdrawn by September when they perceived that 'the Volunteers were purely a political party'.⁵² By now there were also growing signs of a split developing within the Volunteer movement in the county. When Fr. Poland announced in September that a special mass would be held for the welfare of soldiers from Navan at the front, James Quigley walked out of the church, a further indication to Gray that not all Volunteers in the county were favourably disposed to the plight of the empire.⁵³ While the passing of the third Home Rule Bill during the same month 'caused no excitement in the county', apart from a small demonstration in Navan, there was no universal enthusiasm for the war effort amongst the Nationalist population and by November, Gray reported that recruiting in Meath had practically ceased.⁵⁴

In October 1914, Gray made his first reference to the Sinn Féin party. Again James Quigley was singled out for mention as its leader. By November there were 176 Sinn Féin members in Meath but the movement was making very slow progress. From January 1915, Sinn Féin in Meath became actively involved in anti-recruitment demonstrations and its support base widened accordingly. During the course of that year, Gray reported a


complete lack of interest in recruiting in the county which he attributed to the negative attitude of Sinn Féin. In February 1916, a meeting was held in Navan, convened by Lord Lieutenant French, to consider the best way to obtain recruits to bolster the Leinster regiments at the front. Gray suggested that the clergy of all denominations should be asked to assist but was startled that 'for some extraordinary reason the matter was hushed up at once, and the reporters asked not to make any reference to it in the papers'. He was adamant that 'as long as the clergy hold aloof all the efforts of recruiting committees will be a waste of time, a waste of energy and a waste of money.'⁵⁵ But while Gray viewed with some trepidation the growth of Sinn Féin in the county and while he was extremely wary of the motives of the Irish Volunteers who had split from Redmond, the events of April 1916 were to take him completely by surprise.

iii. The battle at Ashbourne.

The battle of Ashbourne at which Gray was killed was probably the most significant event of the Easter Rising outside of Dublin. During the course of it, eight RIC officers and men were killed, more than half of the total of fourteen killed in the whole of Easter Week.⁵⁶ Yet, surprisingly, little has been written about this incident, despite the richness of sources available. What follows is an attempt to reconstruct what happened on 28 April 1916.

The fight at Ashbourne had its origin in the activities of the Fingal Brigade of the Irish Volunteers (composed of men from Lusk, Skerries and Swords and Saint Margaret's), originally formed as the Fifth Battalion of the Dublin Brigade. Shortly before the Rising, Thomas Ashe had been appointed commandant of this brigade. As noted earlier, Ashe had been born near Dingle in 1885 at the time that Alexander Gray was attempting to maintain law and order in the locality. By 1916, Ashe was a national schoolteacher at Lusk in north County Dublin, an ardent Gaelic Leaguer, a GAA organiser, a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood as well as commandant of the Fingal Volunteers.

Veterans of the brigade later claimed that they had been trained as a crack unit to operate on the same principle that the flying columns would later adopt in the War of Independence. Christopher 'Kit' Moran, one of those involved at Ashbourne, later recalled with a degree of bravado: 'We had the fastest hundred men the world ever produced in that sort of way for speed, strength, vision and crack-shot ability. We were so well trained we could hide behind an apple tree.'⁵⁷ According to Paddy Doyle, Mick McAllister 'was the best shot I ever saw', a claim confirmed by another Volunteer, Tommy McArdle: 'He could shoot a trout jumping out of a river.'⁵⁸ They also believed themselves to be a disciplined bunch; one Volunteer later claimed that 'our hurling experience was a great help for giving us a sense of discipline'⁵⁹, thereby indirectly suggesting the role that the GAA had played in preparations for revolutionary activity.

According to Joseph Lawless (whose father, Frank, was also the battalion quartermaster), the brigade received 20 single-barrelled shotguns, a quantity of buck-shot ammunition, 60 pounds of gelignite, detonators and fuse, a quantity of field dressings and a surgical kit on Good Friday.⁶⁰ (At Ashbourne there is evidence that the Volunteers were also in possession of twelve to fifteen modern service rifles, a dozen Martini single-shot rifles and some Mausers taken in at Howth in 1914.⁶¹) It was a reasonable arsenal. On Easter Sunday morning, 120 members of the Fingal Brigade met at Rathbeale Cross. Ashe had summoned them in preparation to march to the city to join up with the insurgents there. However, a Volunteer arrived with a copy of the Sunday paper which contained Eoin MacNeill's countermanding order cancelling the general mobilisation.⁶² According to one of the Volunteers, Tommy McArdle, Ashe did not believe what  read and set off to the city for confirmation. He returned late that night with the message for his men to: 'Guard your arms as you would guard your lives. You never know the moment you may be called to use them.'⁶³ The Volunteers dispersed that evening but the following morning Joseph Lawless' aunt cycled from Dublin with a dispatch from P.H. Pearse ordering the Fingal Brigade to: 'Strike at one o' clock today'. Lawless brought the news to Ashe who ordered the mobilisation of

the brigade. Later that morning the Volunteers gathered at Knockshedan but their numbers were badly depleted from the day before.⁶⁴ There were, in fact, no more than 45 Volunteers present, little more than a column rather than a brigade. The brief of the brigade was to attack the police barracks in north County Dublin, destroy the telegraph system on the Great Northern Railway up to Dundalk and to destroy the Midland Great Western Railway line at Batterstown that would prevent any reinforcement of troops from Athlone reaching the city. (It seems as if plans had been made at a very early stage in the preparations for the Rising for an attack on Ashbourne barracks. A mobilisation order signed by Thomas MacDonagh on 3 April 1916 outlines plans for this attack on Ashbourne and other barracks in the surrounding area, presumably as a means of preventing police reinforcements reaching the capital from towns and villages on its fringes.⁶⁵)

From Monday 24 to Friday 28 April, the small group of Volunteers remained in camp in a farmyard of Badwinstown House in North Dublin. On Tuesday they were joined by Richard Mulcahy and other members of the Second Battalion of the Dublin Brigade.⁶⁶ Joseph Lawless was later to claim that Mulcahy's arrival was fortunate. (It is, however, worth noting that when Lawless' account was written in 1966, Mulcahy was still very much alive and Lawless, who had served as a colonel in the Free State army, had been closely associated with him down through the years):

Thomas Ashe, the commander, was a fine physical specimen of manhood, courageous and high-principled, something of a poet, painter and dreamer, but perhaps in military matters somewhat unpractical. Early in the week, however, we had the very good fortune to be joined by a few stragglers from a city battalion, amongst whom was Dick Mulcahy.... It was soon apparent to everyone that his was the mind necessary to plan and direct operations; cool, clear-headed and practical and with a personality and tact that enabled him virtually to control the situation without in any way undermining Ashe's prestige as the commander.⁶⁷

The Volunteers carried out a series of raids on RIC barracks in the area and were relatively successful in disrupting communications.⁶⁸

On the morning of 28 April 1916, Ashe, Mulcahy and two sections of the brigade made their way on bicycle towards Batterstown, their objective to cut the Midland Great Western Railway line. Ashbourne was en route and one of the column suggested that a raid should be made on the RIC barracks there. This barracks was described by a police officer at the time as 'a flimsily constructed building unsuited for a prolonged defence'. It was situated about 160 yards on the south-east side of Rath Cross, half a mile north of Ashbourne village on the main Dublin to Slane road. It was a two-storeyed building with no windows on either gable end. The barracks was about twenty yards off the road and between it and the road was a high bank of earth with a thorn hedge. Behind the barracks and on the north and south ends were a number of small fields that were skirted by dykes, hedges and banks that would provide good approaches and cover for an attacking party.⁶⁹ Normally, it housed a sergeant and four constables but on Friday morning, following four days of intense fighting in the capital, some extra police had arrived from Navan, Dunboyne and Slane as reinforcements, so that at the time of the attack there were nine RIC men and a district inspector stationed there.⁷⁰

Joseph Lawless gave what is probably the most accurate account of events as the Volunteers approached the village:

Scouts sent out returned with word that the barracks was in a state of defence, and that a barricade was in the course of erection across the main road in front of the barracks. The advance guard, therefore, moved carefully forward, and the two men forming the point of the advance guard challenged, and after a slight scuffle, captured the two Royal Irish Constabulary men who were working at the barricade, and disarmed them. The prisoners were marched to the rear where they remained under guard. The remainder of the advance guard section leaving their bicycles

stacked on the by-road north of the crossroads, took up a position along the fence south of the main road and in front of the barracks, while Ashe, climbing up on to the road and in full view, called on the police to surrender, to which they replied by firing on him, though fortunately without effect.... We observed from this position [to the rear of the barracks] that the barracks had no windows facing north, and, therefore, there was no purpose in opening fire from our position; but the barracks was under continual fire in front from our first section at a range of less than one hundred yards. The police inside were replying to the fire through the loopholes of the iron-shuttered windows, and for about half an hour showed no sign of capitulating.... An attempt was then made to throw one of our two homemade grenades at the barracks in the hope of breaking the door, which though badly splintered by bullets still held firm. This, however, fell short of its objective and exploded in the garden in front, doing no damage to the building. The noise of the explosion was apparently all that was needed finally to break down the resistance for shortly afterwards a white flag or handkerchief fluttered from a window indicating willingness to surrender.⁷¹

But before the surrender could be taken, the Volunteers heard the hoot of a car horn in the distance to the north-west of the barracks on the Slane road.⁷² The barracks had obviously got word to Navan that it was under siege and at 11 a.m. County Inspector Alexander Gray had assembled a force of between 54 and 67 men at Slane to go to the relief of Ashbourne. They packed themselves into 17 motorcars.⁷³

It was now the turn of the Volunteers to be surprised and under threat. Jerry Golden claimed that Ashe immediately ordered one of his men to go to the Volunteers at the rear of the barracks and tell

them to make their way up the Slane road to attack the convoy of cars from the left flank. He ordered the rest of his men to rush to the crossroads at Rath Cross and to be prepared to prevent the police from spreading out and surrounding their position. Another messenger was sent back to Badwinstown camp, which was only a few miles away, for reinforcements.

Chaos ensued. The so-called ambush at Slane was not an ambush at all. The Volunteers were not lying in wait for the enemy to surprise them. If anything, it was the Volunteers who were most surprised, for County Inspector Gray had some idea of what lay ahead at Ashbourne, but the Volunteers had no idea that he and his men were approaching. It subsequently suited both sides to describe what happened at Ashbourne as an ambush. It suited the Volunteers because it suggested they had been prepared and organised to surprise the enemy. It suited the police because it suggested that Gray and his men had driven blindly into a terrible ambush for which they had not been prepared and so they had no chance of victory. Gray's replacement as CI later wrote: 'no precaution was taken to guard against surprise with result that when within 200 yards of the barracks the cars ran into an ambush and the police were under fire before they could leave the cars.'⁷⁴ It could be that Gray felt he had dealt with similar situations in the past (as in Dingle) and did not believe that his men could be in any danger from undisciplined and ill-equipped rebels. Perhaps it is unfair to suggest but his attitude on approaching Ashbourne may have been just as cavalier as that which he had the day he charged up the street of Dingle on his horse, scattering rioters in every direction.

At any rate, according to Lawless' account, there was a great deal of confusion when news of the oncoming police broke. Some of the young Volunteers became desperately frightened when they thought that "hundreds of police had arrived."⁷⁵ Messengers were unable to get word through to the different sections into which the column had been divided. Volunteers scurried from place to place, some desperately looking for shelter; others were so confused that they did not know what to do. They were soon brought under control but according to Lawless, it was Mulcahy, and not Ashe, whose 'words

had the immediate effect of inspiring confidence and making us feel ashamed of our previous apprehensiveness'.⁷⁶ Some of the Volunteers who had been with Ashe at the front of the barracks made their way down the Slane road and took up positions in ditches along one side, while others took shelter high up on a bank on the opposite side. They opened fire on the police convoy, stopping it before it managed to reach Rath Cross. According to Paddy Doyle's account:

The section that stopped the police from coming through played a decisive part in the battle. They were section leader, Charlie Weston, Michael and John McAllister, Bennie McAllister, Richard Aungier and Mick Fleming [along with Doyle himself]. They were the men who stopped the convoy coming in on top of us.... Mick McAllister was the best shot I ever saw. He played an important part in the battle.⁷⁷

As the first RIC man stepped from the leading motorcar he was cut down by McAllister⁷⁸ Sergeant Shanagher was one of the next to be killed in a hail of bullets.⁷⁹ A few of the RIC jumped into the drain cuttings of the bank but these were all killed or wounded in the very early stages of the fight.⁸⁰

Paddy Holohan, whose account it must be admitted is littered with inconsistencies and exaggerations, claimed that Gray's 'utmost stupidity' in ordering the convoy to halt gave the Volunteers the initiative:

For a capable commander on the side of the police in such circumstances the action should have been to dash through, link up with the police in the barracks, for there were few of our men to be seen in the road. Or, if he suspected a strong ambush, retreat at once and take up a position of defence preparatory to an advance against us. Luckily for us Inspector Gray was scared stiff at the sight of three of his men dropping dead within as many seconds. He evidently was not used to these methods of fighting in Ireland and the proposition

frightened him. He ordered his men to take what cover they could underneath the cars, and behind heaps of stones that lay on the roadside, promptly setting the example himself.⁸¹

Holohan's bias does no favours to Gray's reputation, nor is it fair to him. While Gray may not have been used to 'these methods of fighting in Ireland', he certainly was no coward and, in fact, other accounts tell of him urging his men on to fight and leading by example himself.⁸² But Holohan is probably correct in suggesting that Gray made a tactical error in stopping the convoy and ordering his men out of their cars. However, we do not know for certain if he had any choice in the matter. If the initial outburst of fire was so intense (Jerry Golden claimed that there were about thirty bullet wounds in Sergeant Shanagher's upper body), a surge of panic may have made the decision to vacate the cars seem the only viable option. If they were to go forward, they would surely run into more Volunteers up ahead and it was no easy task to try to get seventeen motorcars to back up quickly.

Meanwhile, the Volunteers who had attacked the barracks from the rear had joined their comrades and were now furiously firing at the convoy from its left flank. One of the Volunteers, Tommy Rafferty of Lusk, 'got up on top of the ditch to see if any RIC were in the fields when he was seen by the enemy and shot dead'.⁸³ As John Crinnigan ran from one position to another he was also killed by DI Harry Smyth. Frank Lawless immediately pounced on Crinnigan's Mauser and from an estimated distance of six yards shot Smyth in the head, killing him instantly.⁸⁴

After the initial onslaught that lasted about half an hour, firing became more sporadic as both sides attempted to establish the location of the enemy. The Volunteers in small groups seem to have continually moved positions in order to pin down the RIC who, like themselves, were moving from one sheltered area to the next. Men from both sides were creeping all over the roads and ditches trying to find cover or to root out members of the opposing forces. Lawless wrote that after a period of sporadic firing:

The rest of us began re-arranging our positions with a view to bringing our fire to bear on the

police positions and while doing this another man had his clothes perforated by a bullet. This convinced us that our position was observed by the enemy, and without waiting longer for orders, we decided to open fire. Lying on the roadside I was sheltered by a low bank from which I could see some police sheltering behind a hedge lower down the road. I was able to bring an enfilading fire to bear on them in that position. The act of opening fire was a great relief after the long wait for orders and we became emboldened by it and began to creep closer to the police and so get better effect from our fire. A bullet struck the road in front of my face, and blinded me with sand.⁸⁵

These men were within yards of each other, hiding behind gorse bushes, jumping into drains, running along behind fences. Some Volunteers were running short of ammunition, and finding themselves pinned down, had to scurry for their lives under the cover of brambles and briars as 'bullets were burrowing into the banks' around them.⁸⁶ Confused shouting filled the air each time there was a break in the noise of gunfire. In blind panic, Volunteers fired at Volunteers when they were unable to identify men in the undergrowth. At one stage, the Volunteers were contemplating retreat. According to Lawless, Ashe had actually ordered the retreat when Mulcahy and his section of the column appeared.⁸⁷ Once again, the Volunteers gained the upper hand. According to Lawless:

I was again approaching the gateway through which I had been firing, and I think my attention must have been concentrated on the road ahead, for when [Bartle] Weston, following me, shouted a warning and jumped for cover of another gateway beside him, I got the fright of my life to see a policeman crouched on the bank of the fence on my right, and only about twenty yards from me. I had my rifle slung on my right shoulder and there was no time to seek cover. I realised when I did get him covered, that I should have been shot thrice

over. Then I noticed that he was standing up with his hands over his head. Calling on him to keep his hands up and come out on the road, I was further startled to hear a chorus of voices behind him in the ditch shouting: 'We surrender'.⁸⁸

Lawless then took the surrender of 'eleven burly Royal Irish Constabulary men – a few of them wounded, and all badly demoralised'. These men were marched back to a makeshift dressing station organised by the Volunteers and their wounds were dressed by Dr. Richard Hayes.⁸⁹

Two other groups of policemen were pinned down at Rath Cross and behind a labourer's cottage in its vicinity. After about five hours fighting, the Volunteer reinforcements from Badwinstown eventually arrived. Ashe gave instructions to Mulcahy to: 'Bring down the camp reserve. Charge the police line from the Slane end. I'll support you from the cross.'⁹⁰ According to Jerry Golden's account this is exactly what happened:

At about 4 p.m., we who were at the crossroads, during a lull in the firing, heard a shout, 'Charge', and on looking up the road we saw about 300 yards away Lieutenant Mulcahy and about seven men charge down on the police with fixed bayonets. When the police saw them, those who were able to run threw their arms on the road and rushed into a labourer's cottage which was just about fifty yards from the crossroads on the right-hand side towards Slane. We immediately opened fire on the police as they were huddled together trying to get into the cottage and after about ten minutes we heard the shout, 'We Surrender' and they marched out on the road.... The commandant [Ashe] then ordered firing to cease.⁹¹

Meanwhile up the road towards the village, Frank Lawless, Joseph's father, and his men had taken the surrender of the third group of RIC. Then when the Volunteers turned towards Ashbourne they saw the local district inspector and his men, who had been in the barracks all this time, approach under a makeshift white flag. There

is no substantive evidence to suggest that these policemen had been pinned down in the barracks. It seems as if all the Volunteers had made their way towards Rath Cross. It is possible that a sniper or two had been left to guard the barracks although Jerry Golden's account suggests that this was not the case for he claims that Ashe actually asked the barracks police why they had not attacked the Volunteers from the rear and that the DI replied that as they had already given their surrender, he would not break his word.⁹² With the fighting over, Ashe ordered that the wounded be taken care of and all arms collected. Fr. Murphy (Duleek) attended to the wounded police before they were carried by car to the Meath Infirmary at Navan, which had to greatly augment its staff in order to deal with the wounded.⁹³

At some stage during the fight, when is not clear, Gray was severely wounded. He was not 'killed in the action' as Oliver Coogan has suggested; in fact, he did not die of his wounds until 10 May.⁹⁴ He had been wounded in both hands and one of his hips, probably the result of a close range shotgun blast.⁹⁵ (Paddy Holohan claimed that Frank Lawless 'got a crack at Inspector Gray and blew off both his hands with a shot from his shotgun.'⁹⁶ However, Joseph Lawless makes no reference to this alleged action of his father.) At the time of his death, he had served 32 years in the RIC. He was 58 years old and had been a widower for a number of years. After a funeral service in St. Mary's Protestant Church in Navan, his remains were interred in Lucan cemetery.⁹⁷

The other casualties at Ashbourne were D.I. Henry Smyth (aged 41, 17 years service); Sergeant John Young (Killyon, aged 42, 19 years service); Sergeant John Shanagher (Navan, aged 48, 25 years service); Constables James Hickey (Wells, aged 49, 25 years service); James Gormley (Longwood, aged 25, 4 years service); Richard McHale (Crossakiel, aged 22, 3 years service); James Cleary (Moynalty, aged 28, 7 years service). Two Volunteers were killed: John Crinnigan (Swords) and Thomas Rafferty (Lusk). (*The Meath Chronicle* grossly exaggerated Volunteer casualties at the time claiming that 'no estimate of the Sinn Féin losses is procurable, but it is stated to exceed in dead the total number of police

casualties'.⁹⁸) Between 15 and 20 other policemen were wounded. Three civilians were also killed: two were commercial travellers who happened to be passing through the area at the time and the third was a man named Kepp who was chauffeur to the Marquis Conyngham of Slane. Kepp was shot in the leg by an exploding bullet and died some time after from his wounds.⁹⁹ It is not clear who shot him but Jerry Golden in his account of the RIC's surrender states that the DI in the barracks handed over ammunition to Ashe that included 'soft-nosed bullets with points cut off', the type of dum dum bullets that would inflict such an injury.¹⁰⁰

iv. The aftermath

News of P.H. Pearse's surrender in Dublin was greeted with dismay by the Fingal Volunteers. They had experienced victory in the field and found it difficult to comprehend why they should have to surrender. Joe Kelly later recalled:

'I took my rifle and I think I was going to smash it against the wall. One of our officers told me that would do no good. Then I think I broke down. Our spirits had been so high. We were now well-equipped, having the police rifles and ammunition.'¹⁰¹

Not all were prepared to surrender. Some Volunteers such as Tommy McArdle opted to go on the run in north County Dublin. Others including Michael McAllister and Paddy Holohan made their way to America. Two days after the fight, on Sunday evening 30 April 1916, Ashe and the remainder of the Fingal Volunteers surrendered. Ashe was sentenced to death but his sentence commuted to penal servitude for life. Like de Valera he was fortunate, but for what reason is unclear. At the time the British attorney-general, J.H. Campbell (who later as Lord Glenavy would become a member of the Free State Senate), thought he should have been executed. Campbell wrote: 'Then followed the reprieve of the man who was the leader of the party that murdered nine (sic) members of the Royal Irish Constabulary at Ashbourne, a reprieve to which I was strongly opposed, while I was entirely in favour of leniency towards the rank and file.'¹⁰²

In Meath, in the immediate aftermath of the Rising, the insurgents were widely condemned. At Navan petty sessions a vote of sympathy was passed to the families of the RIC men killed; no reference was made to the two Volunteers.¹⁰³ The editor of *The Meath Chronicle* regarded the ambush as 'a tragic blunder'.¹⁰⁴ It later acknowledged that Gray 'had discharged his duty to the complete satisfaction of the entire community'.¹⁰⁵ Resolutions of sympathy were also passed by Navan Urban District Council.¹⁰⁶ A number of Catholic priests spoke out against the rebellion. Fr. Dillon of Curraha 'spoke very strongly' against it; Fr. Kelly of Ratoath condemned the 'feeble attempt [that] had been made to establish a toy republic under the jurisdiction and by the liberty of Liberty Hall'; Fr. J.J. Poland told his congregation: 'I believe the annals of Easter Week 1916, will form the darkest records in Ireland's history'.¹⁰⁷ But, as the new county inspector of Meath reported, this soon turned to sympathy following the execution of the leaders. Gray's successor, George B. Heard, wrote:

Those who a few weeks previously were openly hostile to Sinn Féinism began to show sympathy towards it and for a time this change of feeling spread rapidly. However, there are no leaders in the county to organise the movement and it is in abeyance, but the seeds have been sown and it would not require much energy on the part of a clever organiser to create a dangerous organisation.¹⁰⁸

The county inspector's intuition was correct. Ironically, Ashe was to play a significant role once again, this time in death, rather than life. Ashe was released under the general amnesty of 1917. Once more throwing himself into Sinn Féin activity, he was arrested at the beginning of September for delivering a seditious speech and sentenced to a year's hard labour in Mountjoy. On 17 September, he and a number of his fellow prisoners arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act claimed the status of political prisoners. When it was refused he went on hunger strike and died in Mountjoy as a result of clumsy attempts to force feed him on 25 September 1917.¹⁰⁹ His funeral, on 30 September, organised by Richard Mulcahy, was an

impressive tribute and one that became a symbolic statement of the intent of the reorganised Irish Volunteers. Charles Townshend has attributed the symbolic turning point in the fortunes of the growing Sinn Féin Party to Ashe's death and has written:

His funeral on 30 September became (predictably, by all but the government) a major national event; thousands of uniformed Volunteers from all over Ireland assembled in Dublin to escort his body to Glasnevin cemetery, where a volley was fired over his grave. Michael Collins, Ashe's successor as head of the IRB, delivered a laconic funeral address – a single sentence declaring that the rifle volley that had just been fired 'is the only speech it is proper to make over the grave of a dead Fenian'.¹¹⁰

Just over two years later the War of Independence broke out in Ireland. In its initial stages, it was once again the RIC who bore the brunt of Volunteer violence. Early in 1920, the barracks at Ashbourne was evacuated by the RIC as part of a policy of abandoning small rural outposts in order to concentrate police strength in the larger towns. Shortly after its evacuation, it was destroyed by the local IRA in order to prevent its future reoccupation.¹¹¹

Lessons had been learned from Ashbourne. While the Easter Rising was overall a resounding military defeat, the battle at Ashbourne was the only significant victory of the Volunteers and there is some justification in the argument that its success inspired hope in a later generation of Volunteers during the War of Independence and possibly pointed the way to the merits of guerrilla warfare. One Volunteer later claimed that: 'The battle of Ashbourne was a small affair in a military sense, but it was very important in the fact that it demonstrated the possibilities of a general rebellion in Ireland.'¹¹² It is the style of fighting at Ashbourne that has attracted the most comment from historians. Maryann Valiulis, in her biography of Richard Mulcahy, wrote in a similar vein that 'the engagement at Ashbourne ... refigured the guerrilla war that the Irish Volunteers

would fight in 1919-21'.¹¹³ Ruth Dudley Edwards in her biography of P.H. Pearse acknowledged that while Ashe and Mulcahy probably had no more than 44 men under their command, 'they kept their guerrilla war going longer than the more impressive static showdown in Dublin.'¹¹⁴ G.A. Hayes-McCoy in his analysis of the military aspect of the 1916 Rising wrote that the fight at Ashbourne approximated 'most closely to the hostilities of 1919-21.'¹¹⁵ Charles Townshend has argued that the Ashbourne fight offered 'a dramatic hint of what might have been (and would in future be...)'¹¹⁶

Seán Ó Lúing, in his biography of Thomas Ashe, presents a somewhat romanticised account of what happened at Ashbourne which includes the exaggeration that 11 policemen were killed that day and also the text of the Pearse-like oration later delivered by Ashe at Casement's Fort in which he referred to the death of Volunteer Tommy Rafferty:

On our side there were two men killed; one patriot from Lusk, a fine manly fellow, who ran from his work to take up his rifle when we sent out the call. His body was taken to a house in Ashbourne, and the women of Meath, who had heard the rifles ringing the whole long day, were in the house with the body of young Rafferty. They stepped aside when his mother entered, trembling in fear and sorrow for the young fellow who lost his life, and for his mother, an old woman. She entered and looked at the dead body of her son, and moved the long locks, and looking up towards Heaven, she said - 'Thank God it is for Ireland you died.'¹¹⁷

Ó Lúing concluded that:

Thus was fought the battle of Ashbourne, where victory was won by the resource of Ashe and the valour of his Fingal Volunteers. Sophists might argue that as battles go it was a small affair. The same might be said of Lexington and Concord, actions that loom large with meaning in modern history. The role of Ashe and the Fifth Battalion during Easter Week, culminating in Ashbourne, was significant in its context. It was an act of

defiance against a powerful military system. It set an object lesson in guerrilla tactics that was copied with success in the later phase of the War of Independence...¹¹⁸

While not denying the valour of those who took part in the fighting on the Volunteer side, what may have been an act of defiance was not against 'a powerful military system.' Their opponents who were killed at Ashbourne were all policemen (and all Irishmen), who had been enforcers of law and order, who were neither trained nor skilled military men and who had no real combat experience.

In 1959, Fingal Old IRA Society organised the construction of a memorial to the two Volunteers killed in the fight at Ashbourne. The Meath County Council was 'enthusiastically helpful' in securing the site at Rath Cross. The memorial was designed by Con O'Reilly and Peter Grant and depicts Christ carrying his cross with the inscription, a quote from Thomas Ashe's poem: 'Let me carry your cross for Ireland, Lord'. According to a commemorative programme the memorial symbolised 'the patriot who dies that the nation may be redeemed from bondage and Christ the redeemer of mankind are, in a metaphorical sense, united by the sculptural idiom under the burden of the cross'.¹¹⁹ The memorial was very much a product of its time. The two young Volunteers killed in the ambush were celebrated (and perhaps rightly so) as 'solid, deep-thinking sons of the Gael, devoted to Ireland, to her language, her games, her ideals, her culture, her freedom, the fibre of whose very nature responded to every call for that freedom'.¹²⁰ No mention was made of the other eight Irishmen killed in the battle or the innocent civilians who lost their lives. Ironically, in the commemorative souvenir programme published to coincide with the unveiling of the monument, Richard Mulcahy recalled observing Dr. Richard Hayes (an officer in the Fingal Battalion) attending the wounded of both sides at Ashbourne, and he related the following anecdote:

Later, after four hours fighting, on a road margined with death and pain and anguish he tended the wounded. As I stood nearby an RIC man stretched out his arms impulsively to cry – 'Oh, we are all Irishmen, Sir, we are all Irishmen. You know me, Sir, you know me, Sir, I am Glennon the boxer'.¹²¹

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1916 (Allen Library, O'Connell Schools, Dublin).
- 66 Jerry Golden [a participant], 'Description of the battle of
Ashbourne, Easter 1916' [hereafter cited as 'Golden account']
(Allen Library, O'Connell Schols, Dublin); Mulcahy was to be
the future chief-of-staff of the IRA during the War of
Independence and in a long political career was to be leader of
Fine Gael from 1944 to 1959.

- 67 Lawless, 'Fight at Ashbourne', p. 309.
- 68 Lawless, 'Fight at Ashbourne', p. 308; 'Golden account'
- 69 John Austin, 'The battle of Ashbourne, 28 April 1916: an eye-witness statement' in Cumann Cabhartha Sean Óglach Fine-Gall, *Leabhar cuimhneacháin 1916: Ashbourne memorial book* (Dublin, n.d.), p. 39.
- 70 Austin, 'The battle of Ashbourne, 28 April 1916, p. 39; Report on the state of the counties, 1916 (PRO, CO904/120).
- 71 Lawless, 'Fight at Ashbourne', pp. 310-11; for a slightly different account, see 'Golden account'.
- 72 'Golden account'.
- 73 Report on the state of the counties, 1916 (PRO, CO904/120).
- 74 *Ibid.*
- 75 Lawless, 'Fight at Ashbourne', p. 312.
- 76 *Ibid.*
- 77 Quoted in Ó Lúing, *I die in a good cause*, p. 84.
- 78 'Golden account'.
- 79 *Freeman's Journal*, 1-5 May 1916 [single edition].
- 80 Lawless, 'Fight at Ashbourne', p. 312.
- 81 Typescript account by Patrick Holohan of his experiences in Easter Week, 1916 [hereafter 'Holohan account'] (NLI, Devoy papers, MS 18,098).
- 82 *Weekly Irish Times: Sinn Féin rebellion handbook, Easter 1916* (Dublin, 1916), p. 31; *Freeman's Journal*, 1-5 May 1916 [single edition].
- 83 'Golden account'.
- 84 'Golden account'.
- 85 Lawless, 'The fight at Ashbourne', pp. 313-14.
- 86 *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- 87 *Ibid.*, pp. 313-14.
- 88 *Ibid.*, p. 315.
- 89 *Ibid.*
- 90 Quoted in Ó Lúing, *I die in a good cause*, p. 85.
- 91 'Golden account'.
- 92 *Ibid.*
- 93 *Meath Chronicle*, 6 May 1916.
- 94 Coogan, *Politics and war in Meath*, p. 54; RIC service records (N.A., M.F.A. 24/9, 370D/18841).

⁹⁵ *Meath Chronicle*, 6 May 1916; *Weekly Irish Times: Sinn Féin rebellion handbook, Easter 1916* (Dublin, 1916), p. 31.

⁹⁶ 'Holohan account'.

⁹⁷ *Meath Chronicle*, 20 May 1916.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6 May 1916.

⁹⁹ *Weekly Irish Times: Sinn Féin rebellion handbook, Easter 1916* (Dublin, 1916), p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ 'Golden account'.

Because of the intense nature of the fighting, particularly the first half hour or so, it is inevitable that survivors of the ambush would have had difficulty in accurately remembering all the various incidents, particularly when they recalled them many years after the event and some attempted to magnify their contribution to the battle. Not surprisingly, there are the inevitable contradictions in the various accounts. Jerry Golden, for example, claimed that an RIC man working on the fortification of the barracks and who made his escape before the attack was never seen again but John McAllister claimed that he was re-taken prisoner having been found under a bed in a farmer's house on the Ratoath road.

McAllister's account is substantiated by an eye-witness, John Austin: 'He [the RIC man] got under the bed in Byrne's house in Cookstown, some distance over the road. Some of the Volunteers followed him and fired towards him. They pulled him from under the bed and made him a prisoner.' Similarly, contemporary published accounts of and references to the fight at Ashbourne were also littered with mistakes. Professor W. Alison Phillips accepted newspaper accounts that there were 400 Volunteers at Ashbourne. J.F. Boyle claimed that it was after the battle that the Volunteers proceeded to attack the barracks. Similarly, another account refers to 'County Inspector Smyth ... urging his men to fight'; Smyth, of course, was the district inspector who accompanied Gray from Navan. The most hopelessly biased account of the events is that of Patrick [Paddy] Holohan. John Devoy met Holohan in America sometime after 1916 and on his visit to Ireland in 1924 Devoy commented to Richard Mulcahy: 'I have heard all about the fight at Ashbourne. A fellow named Holohan

came over to America and gave me an account of it as if he did the whole thing himself'. Holohan, for example, placed 'thirty-five peelers' in the barracks at Ashbourne, 130 policemen in the convoy (in 18 motor cars!), 18 of whom he claimed were killed and over 40 'severely wounded'; *Sunday Press*, 10 Jan. 1960; Austin, 'The battle of Ashbourne, 28 April 1916, p. 41; W. Alison Phillips, *The revolution in Ireland 1906-1923* (London, n.d.), p. 103; J.F. Boyle, *The Irish rebellion of 1916: a brief history of the revolt and its suppression* (London, 1916), p. 136; *Sunday Press*, 10 Jan. 1960; Richard Mulcahy to Richard Hayes, 17 December 1941, original letter pasted onto inside cover of 'A Volunteer Officer', *The battle of Ashbourne* (n.d.); the less than reliable account of the ambush given by Holohan to Devoy is available in Devoy papers (N.L.I., MS 18,098).

101 Quoted in Ó Lúing, *I die in a good cause*, p. 87.

102 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 93.

103 *Meath Chronicle*, 6 May 1916.

104 *Ibid.*

105 *Ibid.*, 20 May 1916.

106 *Ibid.*

107 *Irish Times*, 10 May 1916; *Freeman's Journal*, 8 May 1916.

108 Report on the state of the counties, 1916 (PRO, CO904/120).

109 *Freeman's Journal*, 1, 2 Oct. 1917.

110 Charles Townshend, *Ireland: the 20th century* (London, 1999), p. 83.

111 Austin, 'The battle of Ashbourne, 28 April 1916', p. 39.

112 A Volunteer Officer, *The battle of Ashbourne* (n.d.), p. 1.

113 Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, *Portrait of a revolutionary: General Richard Mulcahy and the founding of the Irish Free State* (Dublin, 1992), p. 15.

114 Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: the triumph of failure* (London, 1977), p. 295.

115 G.A. Hayes-McCoy, 'A military history of the 1916 Rising' in K.B. Nowlan (ed.), *The making of 1916: studies in the history of the Rising* (Dublin, 1969), p. 300.

116 Townshend, *Ireland: the 20th century* (London, 1999), p. 80.

117 Quoted in Ó Lúing, *I die in a good cause*, p. 88.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹¹⁹ Cumann Cabhartha Sean Óglach Fine-Gall, *Leabhar cuimhneacháin 1916: Ashbourne memorial book* (Dublin, n.d.), p. 5.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹²¹ Richard Mulcahy, 'Richard Hayes', in Cumann Cabhartha Sean Óglach Fine-Gall, *Leabhar cuimhneacháin 1916*, p. 23.