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**To What Extent Did Personation  
Taint the Irish 1918 General  
Election Results?  
Evidence From The Bureau of  
Military History Witness  
Statements Examined**

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# To What Extent Did Personation Taint the Irish 1918 General Election Results? Evidence From The Bureau of Military History Witness Statements Examined

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## Introduction

The December 1918 general election is a landmark event in Irish political history. Irish nationalism was transformed as, casting aside Home Rule devolution, a greatly enlarged electorate of men and women opted for republican independence. But a taint of corrupt practice has long attached itself to the decisive victory Sinn Fein won at this election. Scholars who have referenced this taint include Brian Farrell, Robert Kee, Tom Garvin, Patrick Maume, Dermot Meleady, Charles Townshend and Elaine Callinan.<sup>1</sup> Writing in the *Irish Times* on the election's fortieth anniversary in 1958, Proinsias MacAonghusa gets to the nub of the matter:

The true story of the 1918 election has never been completely told, and it is by no means certain that the full facts will ever be revealed. Many tales are heard of large-scale personation on the part of Sinn Fein, but it is almost impossible now to check these allegations. Numerous old Republicans are willing to tell of intimidation, of vote stealing and of "graveyard voting" but, on the other hand, other former Sinn Feiners declare that no such thing happened and that Sinn Fein won on its merit.<sup>2</sup>

The many old Republicans and former Sinn Feiners that survived then are now dead. But the Witness Statements many of them made to the Bureau of Military History (BMH) in the late 1940s and early 1950s are available online and form a database that can be searched using keywords. As Eve Morrison<sup>3</sup> and other historians have discussed, these retrospective statements combine significant limitations with notable strengths. While a military rather than a political focus framed the collection of the witness statements, those making them were permitted wide freedom as to what they chose to include. A

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Farrell *The Founding of Dail Eireann: Parliament and Nation Building* (Dublin, 1971) pp. 47-49: Robert Kee *Ireland: A History* (London, 1980) p. 179: Tom Garvin 1922: *The Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin 1996) p. 39 : Patrick Maume *The Long Gestation: Irish Nationalist Life 1891-1918* (Dublin, 1999) p. 213: Charles Townshend *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence, 1918-1923* (London, 2013) p. 62: Dermot Meleady *John Redmond: The National Leader* (Newbridge, 2013) p. 458: Elaine Callinan *Electioneering and Propaganda in Ireland, 1917-21: Votes, Violence and Victory* (Dublin, 2020) p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> *Irish Times* 13 December 1958. In *The Founding of Dail Eireann* (pp. 47-48) Brian Farrell writes that "The injection of a major new party and an overwhelmingly new electorate into this static system was certain to create change. But the lack of earlier competition, the increased size of the register and some constituency changes — quite apart from the more usual comments about Sinn Fein intimidation, personation and electoral tricks during the campaign (emphasis added) - make it difficult to identify the character of this change."

<sup>3</sup> Eve Morrison "Bureau of Military History Witness Statements as Sources for the Irish Revolution" [https://bmh.militaryarchives.ie/wp.content/uploads/2019/06/Bureau\\_of\\_Military\\_statements-as\\_sources-for\\_the\\_Irish-Revolution.pdf](https://bmh.militaryarchives.ie/wp.content/uploads/2019/06/Bureau_of_Military_statements-as_sources-for_the_Irish-Revolution.pdf)

complex mix of political and military events impacted the witnesses' experiences during the exercise's reference period - from the foundation of the Irish Volunteers in November 1913 to the ceasefire marking the end of the War of Independence in July 1921. Electoral involvement was notably to the fore of many participants' activities in the years 1917 and 1918. Then republican military action was in abeyance while Sinn Fein was successfully challenging the Irish Parliamentary Party at by-elections before almost completely displacing it at the general election of December 1918. This makes the BMH a more valuable source for a topic like electoral corruption that might at first glance appear to be the case. This value is enhanced by the paucity of the evidence on this issue to be found in alternative sources such as the press or British state records.

### *The 1918 General Election*

Under the first-past-the-post system, Sinn Fein won 73 out of 105 Irish seats in 1918.<sup>4</sup> The party won one out of the four university seats. Ten seats were won in victories over Unionist opponents, either in three- cornered contests with the Irish Party also in the field or under the terms of a deal that split eight Ulster seats equally between the two nationalist parties to avoid the danger of their falling into Unionist hands. In twenty-five safely nationalist seats Sinn Fein won unopposed. The party won just over half its seats total (37 out of 73) in contests with the Irish Party. It is on this set of contests that persistent allegations of personation subsequently centred.

### *The Offence of Personation*

Personation could be committed in two ways. One was when a person applied for a ballot paper in the name of some other person, 'whether that name be the name of a person living or dead or of a fictitious person'. The other way of offending was when a person, having voted once, applied in the same constituency for a ballot paper in his or her own name. To combat personation, the law provided for candidates to appoint personation agents who could be present in all polling places. Through the presiding officer, this agent could initiate a variety of actions. He could have prescribed questions put to any person applying for a ballot paper. He could have a person providing the required answers to those questions obliged to swear an oath. If still unsatisfied, by declaring to the presiding officer a belief that personation was being committed and undertaking to prove that this was the case, he could cause that person to be taken into police custody. In this case, subsequent failure to sustain a prosecution left the candidate for whom the agent was acting liable to pay compensation to the detained person.<sup>5</sup>

### *Evidence from the Witness Statements*

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<sup>4</sup> B.M. Walker (ed.) *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1801-1922* (Dublin, 1978)

<sup>5</sup> William McGrath *The Law of Parliamentary Elections in Ireland* (Dublin, 1918)

Searching the BMH Witness Statements using the keywords ‘personation’, ‘personated’ and ‘personating’ identifies 23 cases that contain admissions of personation (for full details of these cases see Appendix 1). These cases are made up by 21 men and 2 women. Many of the admissions are either couched in the passive voice (‘personation was rife’ recurs a number of times) or are broadly collective in scope (e.g. the Volunteers ‘indulged in a spate of personation voting for the Sinn Fein candidate’ or the Volunteers ‘did a huge amount of personation on behalf of Sinn Fein’). A minority are more individual and quite unabashed - ‘we enjoyed ourselves very much that day, personating voters’ (Margaret Brady, Leitrim): ‘I never put in a busier day. From morning to night I voted in every booth’ (Sean Farrelly, North Meath). Hardly anyone involved felt the inclusion in their statement of any justification for their behaviour to be required. An exception was Eugene Kilkeny (‘I myself voted at least fifty times’ in Leitrim) who framed personation within ‘an all-out effort to win the election and finally oust the Redmond Party, in whom at least all the younger generation had lost all confidence’.

What is particularly striking about these 23 cases is just how concentrated they are in a few constituencies. In fact, 18 of the 23 cases are located in just two constituencies – Westmeath (12 cases) and Leitrim (6 cases). The remaining cases are supplied by North Dublin (3 cases), East Mayo (1 case) and North Meath (1 case).

### *The Case of Westmeath*

The redistribution of Irish parliamentary seats that preceded the 1918 election reduced Westmeath’s representation from two MPs to one. This one seat was contested by two outgoing MPs who had taken their Westminster seats along with a third candidate. The victor, Laurence Ginnell, was first elected for the Irish Party in North Westmeath in 1906. Nationally he became well known as the agrarian radical advocate of cattle driving and, during the First World War, his relentless harrying of the government earned him the soubriquet of ‘the member for Ireland’. The Irish Party expelled him in 1909 but, as an independent, he survived its challenge in the January 1910 general election, held his seat unopposed in December 1910 and thereafter expanded his support base in local elections. He joined Sinn Fein in 1917. The other outgoing MP, Sir Walter Nugent, who sat for South Westmeath from 1907, was a conservative figure close to John Redmond in his views. Alienated by John Dillon’s more strongly nationalist line on the 1916 Rising and the 1918 conscription threat, he chose to stand as an independent in 1918.<sup>6</sup> The Irish Party thereupon nominated a Mullingar businessman with a local government political background as its standard bearer. He came a poor second while Nugent trailed in a much worse third.

Unique as this lineup of candidates was, it provides no explanation for why personation should be so frequently recollected in this county when almost everywhere else it is

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<sup>6</sup> See *Dictionary of Irish Biography* entries for Laurence Ginnell and Sir Walter Nugent: also Michael Wheatley *Nationalism and the Irish Party: Provincial Ireland 1910-1916* (Oxford, 2005) especially Chapters 4 and 6

not. A grafting onto Ginnell's pre-existing independent nationalist organisation of the county's Sinn Fein/Volunteer structures might form part of an explanation.<sup>7</sup> But on this, and on other factors that might have been at play in this county, the BMH witness statements are frustratingly silent. In common with one-third of Sinn Fein candidates,<sup>8</sup> and with all of those elected in the constituencies for which we have BMH personation admissions, Ginnell was in prison when the election was held. He had been in custody since March 1918.

### *Leitrim and the Fate of Personation Agents*

Leitrim was another county reduced from two seats to a single seat by the redistribution. As it was reported to be at its fourth attempt that the Irish Party secured a candidate, this seat came very close to joining the twenty-five taken unopposed by Sinn Fein.<sup>9</sup> The candidate was the young barrister son of the veteran MP for North Longford, J.P. Farrell. During the course of the election campaign Farrell senior suffered a serious stroke<sup>10</sup> and his son left Leitrim to return to his Longford family home. A weak situation then seems to have turned into complete collapse. Press reports state that on polling day the Irish Party had no personation agents in 'practically all of the South Leitrim and some of the North Leitrim booths'.<sup>11</sup>

Presented with an open goal, so to speak, Leitrim's personators could score at will. Irish Party personation agents were present in other places where Sinn Fein personation was admitted to have taken place. The only reference to them made in the BMH witness statements comes from North Meath. There, initiating Sean Farrelly's busiest of days, 'Dr. Cusack's personation agents were intimidated and had to leave almost every polling booth, leaving us a free hand'.<sup>12</sup> From Roscommon there was a press report that 'there was a considerable amount of personation by Sinn Fein voters at Taughmaconnell polling booth, which was practically in possession of imported intimidators'.<sup>13</sup> Creating no opportunities for personation but giving an insight into the election's inflamed environment, Irish Party personation agents were reported to have suffered serious assaults in Mayo<sup>14</sup> and Monaghan<sup>15</sup> while returning home after the polls closed.

### *Locals and Outsiders*

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<sup>7</sup> "Almost to a man, his [Ginnell's] lieutenants in North Westmeath became prominent local Sinn Feiners in 1917-18" Michael Wheatley *Nationalism and the Irish Party* p. 117: see also p. 136

<sup>8</sup> William Murphy *Political Imprisonment and the Irish, 1912-1921* (Oxford, 2014) Appendix A.4

<sup>9</sup> *Leitrim Observer* 21 December 1918

<sup>10</sup> Mel Farrell 'The Tide Had Definitely Turned': The Irish Party, Sinn Fein and the Election Campaigns in Longford, 1917-18' *New Hibernia Review*, 21 (3), 1917, pp. 83-104

<sup>11</sup> *Leitrim Observer* 21 December 1918: see also *Sligo Champion* 21 December 1918, *Strokestown Democrat* 21 December 1918

<sup>12</sup> See extract from BMH Witness Statement 1734, Sean Farrelly, in Appendix A

<sup>13</sup> *Roscommon Messenger* 21 December 1918

<sup>14</sup> *Freeman's Journal* 18 December 1918

<sup>15</sup> *Freeman's Journal* 17 December 1918

BMH statements refers to parties of Volunteers doing duty at polling stations ‘to ensure that their supporters would be allowed to vote freely’. In a press largely supportive of the Irish Party the ironic term “peace patrols” was often used to refer to hurley-carrying young men who were portrayed as engaged in intimidating opponents. The many uncontested seats created a large pool of activists available to travel to areas where contests were taking place. Thus Volunteers/”peace patrollers” might reside locally or they might come from a distance. How, in relation to admitted personation, was this mix of locals and outsiders recollected in the Witness Statements?

When the five constituencies with BMH personation admissions are taken together, a contrast can be noted between the three Leinster ones where only the involvement of local actors is indicated and the two Connacht ones where outsiders also took part. There were no general election contests in Cavan and a company of Volunteers from there went into neighbouring Leitrim where they engaged in personation.<sup>16</sup> There had been a Sinn Fein victory at a by-election in East Cavan in June 1918. Then Leitrim Volunteers had gone in a body to Cavan where they took part in personation,<sup>17</sup> gaining experience which no doubt proved valuable when the general election was held nearly six months later. East Mayo featured a contest between the two party leaders, Eamon De Valera and John Dillon. De Valera was reported to have supporters travel not only from nearby Roscommon and Sligo but also from Limerick and Clare, where he had won his by-election victory the previous year. Patrick Cassidy’s witness statement says the Clare contingent engaged in personation and even attributes De Valera’s victory to its large volume.<sup>18</sup> The reliability of this recollection is called into question by its conclusion that ‘even then, we only won by a small majority’. De Valera polled 8,975 votes (66.5%): Dillon’s total was 4,514 (33.5%).

### *Conclusion*

The fact that the vote in the thirty-nine contests between Sinn Fein and the Irish Party split even more strongly in Sinn Fein’s favour perhaps explains why no historian referring to personation in this election has gone on to suggest that it was a decisive factor in the outcome. Personation may have gilded the lily of victory, increasing the Sinn Fein share of the vote and bloating its victors’ majorities. But there isn’t clear evidence of this from the constituencies with BMH personation admissions. In North Dublin and North Meath as in East Mayo, the Sinn Fein vote share is a little below the overall average for the thirty-nine contests of 69%. The Westmeath (75%) and Leitrim (85%) shares are higher than average but there are two Connacht constituencies (West Mayo and South Galway) that have higher Sinn Fein vote shares than Leitrim and no personation admissions. In

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<sup>16</sup> See extract from BMH Witness Statement 1613, Sean Sheridan, in Appendix A

<sup>17</sup> See BMH Witness Statement 1268, Patrick Hargaden: there was personation on both sides in East Cavan and a subsequent agreement between the two candidates’ election agents to withdraw all prosecutions for the offence - see letter from Edward J. Duffy, *Anglo-Celt* 13 July 1918

<sup>18</sup> See extract from BMH Witness Statement 1017, Patrick Cassidy, in Appendix A

another five constituencies with no personation admissions the Sinn Fein vote share exceeded 80%

From the BMH statements personation emerges as a rarely recollected feature of the election. 1% of statements admit it: 99% do not. Admissions show a high geographical concentration, with the vast majority coming from just two constituencies. There is at least a single admission for one in eight (5 out of 39) of the constituencies featuring Sinn Fein versus Irish Party contests. For the other seven-eighths of this group there are no admissions.

With evidence this thin, why should recurrent references have been made to personation in this election over the years? Both prospective and retrospective factors appear to have been at work here. Prospectively, in advance of polling day the Irish Party was flagging extensive personation as the means by which an election victory it would win under free and fair conditions could be stolen by its Sinn Fein opponent.<sup>19</sup> Given the grip the Irish Party still had on the press<sup>20</sup>, 1918 newspaper references to personation need to be treated with at least as much care and caution as the comparable content of BMH witness statements. Retrospectively, the Irish Free State moved quickly to target personation in a strengthening of the law on electoral corruption. As it did so, a virtually unchallenged Dail narrative that tarred with same brush of corruption all the elections of the 1918-22 period took shape.<sup>21</sup> But, conducted under the shadow of many gunmen, without a functioning police force and with a “Pact” in partial operation that undemocratically curbed party competition in an attempt to arrest the Republican movement’s disintegration into warring factions, the 1922 election was, from the standpoint of democratic electoral integrity, one of a very dubious kind. The 1918 election had merits and demerits of a different, and more normal, variety. It is on these specific features that it deserves to be judged.

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<sup>19</sup> E.g. “The only trouble is the question of getting voters to the poll and preventing the tactics that have been made use of in recent elections such as in Longford and in East Clare and other places, being put into operation here in East Mayo, that is to say personating electors and voting people who are not entitled to vote... If the electors of this constituency are allowed to vote freely there is not a shadow of doubt on my mind that our majority will be at least two to one, and probably a great deal more”, John Dillon speaking at Ballaghadereen, *Freeman’s Journal* 13 December 1918

<sup>20</sup> See Michael Wheatley *Nationalism and the Irish Party* pp.17-21

<sup>21</sup> See Dail Eireann Debate, Friday, 20 October 1922, Third Dail Vol. 1, No. 25 Prevention of Corrupt Practices at Elections

## Appendix 1 BMH Statements containing personation admissions

|              |                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Dublin North | Walter Brown 1346                    | He [Frank Lawless] won the election for North Dublin by a large majority. Personation was rife on behalf of Sinn Fein                                                                                                                             |
|              | James Crenegan 1395                  | the Volunteers did the greater amount of the work in connection with the election and, of course, they were personating as well – voting not only for dead people but for living ones that who were known to be hostile                           |
|              | John Gaynor 1447                     | On the day of the polling the Volunteers were required to have a party on duty at each polling station to ensure that their supporters would be allowed to vote freely. In addition they did a huge amount of personation on behalf of Sinn Fein. |
| Leitrim      | Margaret Brady 1267<br>(nee Sweeney) | We cooked and supplied meals to the Volunteers on duty that day... we enjoyed ourselves very much that day, personating voters. We voted for dead and absentee voters and also for people whom we knew would be hostile to Sinn Fein              |
|              | Bridget Doherty 1193                 | On polling day we took over a vacant house in the village and in this we catered for the Volunteers who were on duty that day. That day we also personated extensively. We dressed in different clothes and voted in the name of absentee voters  |
|              | Patrick Doherty 1194                 | On polling day they [the Volunteers] did duty at the                                                                                                                                                                                              |

|           |                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|           |                       | different stations to ensure that those in sympathy with Sinn Fein could record their votes freely. They also indulged in, in some cases, in personating voters who were absent or dead and in this way ensured the return of the Sinn Fein candidate                                                 |
|           | Patrick Hargaden 1268 | On polling day we were on duty in Mohill town while others of our company went to Carrick-on-Shannon. Personation was indulged in on a large scale and our men voted for absentee and dead voters                                                                                                     |
|           | Eugene Kilkenny 1146  | In an all-out effort to win the election and finally oust the Redmond Party, in whom at least all the younger generation had lost all confidence, personation was resorted to on a large basis. I myself voted at least fifty times.                                                                  |
|           | Sean Sheridan 1613    | On the morning of polling day our [Cavan] company was drafted into Carrigallen in Co. Leitrim... we did duty on the polling station in that town and in the town itself. We also indulged in personation on a large scale and several of our men voted two or three times for the Sinn Fein candidate |
| Mayo East | Patrick Cassidy 1017  | The Redmondites were beaten in the election but this was only accomplished by a great volume of personation and by falsifying the register of voters and so forth. Dead and absent voters                                                                                                             |

|             |                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|             |                        | <p>“recorded” their votes. Volunteers from Co. Clare had come up to Ballaghaderreen for this election and they all voted for some one who was on the register by was either dead or absent from the country. Even then, we only won by a small majority.</p>                                                                             |
| Meath North | Sean Farrelly 1734     | <p>On polling day we had a busy time. Dr. Cusack’s personation agents were intimidated and had to leave almost every polling booth, leaving us a free hand. I never put in a busier day. From morning to night I voted in every booth and wound up in a booth in Springville where I voted in the name of a man named J.H. Nicholson</p> |
| Westmeath   | David Daly 1337        | <p>On polling day I visited all the polling stations in the battalion area, as we had volunteers on duty at each station to ensure there was no interference with the supporters of Sinn Fein. At each station I was given a list to vote for by our men. Personation in this election was rife.</p>                                     |
|             | Bartholemew Flynn 1552 | <p>The Volunteers also personated in the voting on behalf of Ginnell who was elected at the head of the poll</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|             | Thomas Kiernan 1594    | <p>Quite a lot of personation was indulged in by the Volunteers on behalf of the Sinn Fein candidate</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|             | Patrick Lennon 1336    | <p>Personation was rife In this election and we voted for everyone who was on the register who was dead or</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

|  |                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |                         | who had left the district, as well as several who are alive also                                                                                                                                                    |
|  | Patrick McCabe 1551     | [The Volunteers] organised transport to bring the people to the polling stations and also indulged in a spate of personation voting for the Sinn Fein candidate                                                     |
|  | Michael MacCormack 1503 | `Vote early and vote often' was the slogan of the day and on the polling day personation became a game                                                                                                              |
|  | Michael McCoy 1610      | There was the usual canvassing of voters by the Volunteers, also collection for the election fund and, of course, personation by the Volunteers on polling day at the voting stations for Ginnell                   |
|  | John Mackin 1550        | Laurence Ginnell was the Sinn Fein candidate and he was returned at the head of the Poll. Personation on his behalf was rife                                                                                        |
|  | Michael Murray 1498     | As elsewhere throughout the country, personation was rife on behalf of Sinn Fein and Ginnell was returned at the head of the poll                                                                                   |
|  | Seamus O'Mara 1504      | [The Volunteers] were busy canvassing and organising on behalf of Sinn Fein... and in guarding speakers at meetings and so forth and, of course, on polling day in personating on behalf of the Sinn Fein candidate |
|  | James Reilly 1593       | On the polling day, the Volunteers provided parties for duty at the polling stations to ensure that the supporters of Sinn                                                                                          |

|  |                   |                                                                                                                                                                |
|--|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |                   | Fein would be allowed to cast their votes freely. The Volunteers also did an amount of personation on behalf of Sinn Fein                                      |
|  | Edward Seery 1592 | On polling day the Volunteers did duty at the different polling stations and, as well, indulged in a spate of personation on behalf of the Sinn Fein candidate |