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Ollscoil na hÉireann Mú Nuad

IRA activity in Westmeath during the War of Independence, 1918-21.

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Abbreviations in text:

ASU	-	Active Service Unit
A/G	-	Adjutant-General.
GAA	-	Gaelic Athletic Association.
IRA	-	Irish Republican Army.
MP	-	Member of Parliament.
O/C	-	Officer Commanding.
RIC	-	Royal Irish Constabulary.

Abbreviations in footnotes:

CI	-	County Inspector.
MRWN	-	Midland Reporter and Westmeath Nationalist.

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Introduction.

Between 1918-1921, Ireland was swept along by a phenomenon, the entire island became embroiled in a transition, from being ruled by another power, namely Britain in entirety, to becoming independent yet divided. This period has been well documented, analysed and written about, on a national scale. The active areas have received the attentions of many historians and commentators. But the 'other' areas rarely receive a mention; the mistake is too often made of superimposing a blueprint that was concocted for one county, upon all the rest. True, Westmeath follows the general pattern that occurred in the rest of the country, that of young men joining the Volunteers and becoming increasingly militant against Crown Forces, marginalised to a large extent from their local communities, and working more often than not on their own initiative. Also the pattern of the war was dictated largely, by changes in the British government's policies in Ireland and GHQ's reaction to them. Therefore the country at many stages did move as one, changing tactics to receive the various threats and challenges thrown at them. But the counties also followed separate paths, slight differences occur in the methods adopted, when these methods were adopted and to a certain degree who adopted them. The movement was developed along regional lines, along parish boundaries; therefore it was always going to form differently, depending on the attitude, politics and policies of the activists and the local communities reaction to them. Thousands joined the ranks of the Volunteers during the latter half of the 1910s, but many did not foresee the violent role that they would be asked to play. After the 1916 Rising, the Volunteers who had been interned had strong reasons to become more militant, and from here on Volunteers were being arrested and re-arrested and in turn this increased their radicalism. Activists set up small nuclei by enrolling their brothers, close friends or work-mates. The movement spread as these small groups began to drill openly, its ranks swelled with the conscription crisis of 1918, when everybody realised that the Volunteers were the most capable body to oppose conscription into the British Army. Effectively then, the majority of recruits were joining for the wrong reasons and therefore the possibility of activity was still very much in the hands

of a small cluster of men. The most important thing that I have attempted to convey is the fact that there did exist a militant section of men in the county of Westmeath and that they did affect British rule in the county. The fact that activity in the less 'active' counties is seldom mentioned could have the effect of people presuming that nothing whatsoever occurred.

In the course of this work, I will attempt to document the course of events in Westmeath during the War of Independence. I have divided the thesis into three chapters. Chapter 1 is a chronology of events that occurred within the county in this period; beginning with the minor acts of defiance in 1918, accentuating along a radical path, finally ending with total lawlessness in 1921. Chapter 2 assesses these events, attempting to explain the path that the county took in relation to the rest of the country and why different areas of the county developed conflicting attitudes and methods to the war. Finally Chapter 3 provides a social composition of the Westmeath Volunteers, providing some indication as to who joined the IRA as regards age, occupation, social class and marital status.

CHAPTER 1.

ACCOUNT OF EVENTS IN WESTMEATH DURING THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE BACKGROUND TO CONFRONTATION

Westmeath was fairly active in terms of agrarian agitation in the years leading up to War of Independence. In fact the first shot of the ranch war was fired not in the normal centre of agrarian radicalism, the west, but in north Westmeath. On 14 October 1906, a 'great gathering of young men' assembled at the Downs to denounce the grazing system. Laurence Ginnell, MP for north Westmeath went beyond mere denunciation and advocated a new form of action – cattedriving.¹ During 1907-8, Westmeath was seriously affected by cattle driving, with a total of eighty-eight drives reported by the R.I.C.²

Also in 1909, Westmeath had by far the highest rate of persons being boycotted in Leinster. There were a total of 67 per 100,000; Longford was the closest in Leinster with less than half of that figure – 33. Only Galway, Leitrim and Clare had higher.³ David Seth Jones describes how forms of agitation against landlords died down during the first three years of World War I, but were renewed at the end of 1917. This renewed agitation lasted until 1920, during which time it was closely linked with the struggle for independence. Cattle driving was renewed and untenanted and other grazing farms were invaded and occupied to create conacre and adjustment plots for landless men. A number of ranching areas were affected; the worst were in counties Clare and Westmeath.⁴ Fitzpatrick has revealed that during the War of Independence, seizures, which GHQ had neither the ability nor the intention of preventing.⁵

¹ Irish Times, 15 Oct 1906, provided in Paul Bew, *Conflict and Conciliation in Ireland*, (New York, 1987), p.139.

² Return by counties and quarterly periods of the number of cattle drives reported to have taken place in Ireland from the first day of 1907 to the 30th day of September 1908, p.2, H.C. 1908(310), xc, 3; figures for the fourth quarter of 1908 were taken from the census returns submitted to the House of Commons by the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Augustine Birrell, Hansard 5, xv, 504 (17 March, 1910), contained in David Seth Jones, *Graziers, land reform and political conflict in Ireland*, (New York, 1995), p.189.

³ Return showing number of cases of boycotting and persons boycotted in each county in Ireland on the 30th day of November 1905 and the 31st day of January 1909, pp. 2-3, H.C. 1909 (57), lxxiii, 3, provided in David Jones, *Graziers, land reform and political conflict in Ireland* (New York, 1995), p.191.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ David Fitzpatrick, 'The Geography of Irish Revolution', in *Past and Present*, lxxvii, (1978), p.119.

A midlands correspondent noted that IRA engagements were often thinly disguised land of the *Freeman's Journal*, noted that in the 1918 general election, Sinn Féin had attracted the support of the farming community, but he believed this was only because of the conscription menace and that they did not view kindly the close alliance between Labour and Sinn Fein, nor were they satisfied with the aggressive policy that was developing.⁶

An assessment of the Intelligence Notes from 1913, illustrates the United Irish League were comparatively active in attempting to achieve their aims. In 1913 there were seven cattle drives in Westmeath, only three counties had more. In 1914 there were a further six cattle drives, and in 1915 there were a total of four, only King's county had more in Leinster.

It is interesting to note here that James Hayden MP, wrote in the *Westmeath Examiner* in 1907, 'the signs in the political sky indicate clearly that in a very short time nothing will be heard of the so called Sinn Féin movement which has for its aim the termination of the parliamentary effort.'⁷ And by the signs he was probably correct because everybody was gathering under a different banner. But it is will worth noticing one commentator's view of Laurence Ginnell's campaign, ' he (Ginnell) was a Sinn Féiner before most of us. He became famous through a dogged fight with his Westmeath men for land. Mountjoy jail knew him ages before it became the training ground for Irish cabinet ministers.'⁸ As a result of a cattle drive in the New Forest area, fifteen members of the Cloneyheigue Land League branch (Tyrellspass area) were arrested and imprisoned for three months in November 1908. A large crowd of supporters including three bands followed them as they were led off.⁹ One of the men, a Patrick Seery was killed during an ambush on Clara R.I.C. barracks in 1920, which illustrates to some extent the fact that participants in the agrarian agitation campaign went on to become active members of the Irish Volunteers.¹⁰

⁶ Weekly *Freeman's Journal*, 14 Jun 1919.

⁸ 'Roddy the Rover' of the Irish Press, in Pádraig Ó'Lionárd, *Fighting Larry Ginnell*, (Dublin, 1945), p. 9.

⁹ Oliver Egan, *Tyrellspass- Past and Present*, (Tyrellspass, 1986), p. 46-47.

Volunteer corps began to be established throughout the county in the first six months of 1914, though there is evidence to suggest that one was established in Moate as early as the end of 1913. They only possessed one rifle, so they drilled using wooden guns under an ex-British soldier named Raftery. Many of them joined the British army at the outbreak of World War I.¹¹ Similar movements must have been operating throughout the county, as there was a Volunteer demonstration in Mullingar in summer 1914; where a grand total of twenty-seven corps numbering 3,000 men marched through the town.¹²

In September 1914, before the division into two bodies subsequently known as the National Volunteers and the Irish Volunteers there were a total of forty branches of Volunteers with a total membership of 3,993. However, it is recorded that only 194 of the members were opponents of the Redmonite policy of recruiting. Rumours abound to this day, that there had been the formation of a National Volunteer force in Athlone, in September 1913. The *Westmeath Independent* of 25 October, gives an account of no less than 5,000 men in 20 companies marching through Athlone accompanied by bands.¹³ It would appear that nothing fitting this description happened. Michael J. Judge, a prominent member of the Irish Volunteers, published a forthright statement in September 1914 – ‘I must say, and I can prove what I say, that the Athlone Volunteers of last year had no existence save in the wild fancies of a journalist who had dined too well and indulged too freely in the “glowing cup.”’¹⁴ For an objective assessment it is best to view the contemporary police reports, the report for October 1913, states there had been no change in nationalist and labour organisations since September, except that, ‘a division of the A.O.H. has been established at Ballinalack, Rathowen sub district. No public meetings or demonstrations were held during the month save the so-called parades of the Midland

¹⁰ Jeremiah Sheehan, *Worthies of Westmeath*, (Moate, 1987), p.113.

¹¹ Liam Cox, *Moate, County Westmeath. A History of town and District*, (Athlone, 1981), p.178.

¹² Peter Wallace, *Multyfarnham Parish History* (Mullingar, 1987), p.114.

Volunteers which take place at Athlone and are generally regarded as a farce in the locality.’¹⁵ In a report of the Crime Special Branch of the R.I.C., for Westmeath, it is stated,

‘ A press report that a force had been recently raised in Athlone, called the Midland Volunteer Force, to meet “Carson’s Army”, and that it had its first parade at Athlone, on 11 October, proved on investigation to be quite false and the police believe that the information was supplied by Mr. Mc. Hayes, editor of the *Westmeath Independent*. On the 22 October fifty-four men, in fours, headed by a band marched through Athlone. No arms were carried and there was no drill. On 29 October, twenty-nine men, in fours, marched through the outskirts of Athlone, headed by Mr. Hayes. The affair is regarded by everyone has a joke, and these two marches are due to the efforts of Mr. Hayes, who was trying to substantiate the information he had previously supplied in the press.’¹⁶

However, perhaps the exercise had some redeeming features as F.X. Martin points out, that ‘For all its bogus nature.... The news in October 1913 about a rapidly expanding Volunteer force at Athlone served its purpose. It stimulated the nationalists everywhere to think hard in terms of an armed body and convinced them that the British government would not be of a mind to suppress it’¹⁷

In another return taken in the month of December 1914, the strength of the Irish Volunteers is again recorded at 194, with the paltry sum of twenty-one rifles.¹⁸ In October 1914, twenty-four rifles were received in Mullingar from Dublin, and again in August 1915 the Ballinahown branch received four rifles from Dublin. By the 31 January 1916, the number of rifles was recorded at nineteen.¹⁹ However, after the Rising this low number would have been depleted even further. At the end of February 1917, the military estimated that the Irish Volunteers in Westmeath had only a total of seven rifles and eight shotguns.²⁰

¹³ *Westmeath Independent*, 25 Oct 1913.

¹⁴ *Irish Volunteer*, 10 Oct 1913.

¹⁵ County Inspector monthly report, Jan 1917. (From now on referred to as CI). These police reports are contained within the Colonial Office papers in the P.R.O. London, but I viewed them on microfilm in the library at NUI Maynooth.

¹⁶ Crime Special Branch report, Oct 1913, contained within the Colonial Office records.

¹⁷ F.X. Martin, chapter entitled, ‘MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers’, in Martin and Byrne (eds.), *The scholar revolutionary; Eoin MacNeill*, (Shannon, 1973), p.128.

¹⁸ *Intelligence reports 1913-1916*, Brendan Mac Goille Choille (ed.), (Dublin, 1966), pp. 109-112.

¹⁹ Return of arms and ammunition in possession of the Irish, National and Ulster Volunteers 1917, contained in police reports.

²⁰ Jeudwine papers (Commander of the Fifth Division, 1919-1922), Imperial War Museum, London, file no. 72/82/2.

Prior to the rebellion the county inspector wrote, 'There are not more than a dozen who openly identified themselves with the Sinn Féin movement and mainly all of them resided in Athlone. About half this number left the county at the time of the outbreak, so that the county was in no way affected by the action of the Sinn Féiners.'

He goes on to describe that originally there was a hostile feeling towards the rebels; but the executions of the leading rebels, the shooting of Sheehy-Skeffington and the alleged brutal treatment of people in Dublin by British soldiers, all combined to turn the feelings of the majority of people into sympathy for the rebels. He states that Sinn Féin members in Athlone wore badges and that one church offered up Mass to the souls of the executed. The clergy neither condemned nor condoned the Rising. When negotiations were taking place for the Home Rule settlement the people had no pronounced views. The doubt as to whether the exclusion of Ulster was to be a temporary or permanent arrangement prevented them from having any confirmed decision. However they were inclined to support the Irish party in accepting temporary exclusion, but even when it seemed that it could be a permanent arrangement they still remained loyal to the Irish party.²¹ By an act of 1885, the county was divided into two divisions, each returning one member. North Westmeath had had a long tradition of supporting the Anti-Parnellite Nationalist, James Tuite, from 1885. Since 1906, they had been returning the more radical independent, Laurence Ginnell. Likewise in Westmeath South, the Anti-Parnellite Donal Sullivan, had been returned from 1885, and after his death in 1907, they supported the Independent Nationalist Sir Walter Nugent.²²

²¹ CI monthly report, Jan 1917.

²² B.M. Walker, *Parliamentary election results in Ireland*, (Dublin, 1978).

Easter 1916

The Easter Rising in Westmeath was limited to a small show of force in the Tyrellspass area. According to one commentator- 'At the Malone family home at Meedin, Tyrellspass were fired the only shots heard between Dublin and Galway during Easter 1916.'²³ There had been seventy registered Volunteers in Tyrellspass but only seven answered the call that morning, even with this low number, Tomás Ó Maoileóin suspected that the reason for some of the men coming out was because they viewed it as an ideal opportunity to seize land. Seamus Ó Maoileóin, his brother and three others attempted to blow up the bridge at Ballycastle; they failed at this task and lifted some track instead, they then billeted themselves in the Ó'Maoileóin's house in Meedin. The R.I.C. attempted a raid on the Tuesday but were persuaded to leave by the firing of a volley of shots. They returned to attempt the same on Thursday evening and again on Saturday morning, but once again the insurgents fired shots and drove them away. On Monday the Volunteers dispersed, Seamus was captured on his way back to Limerick where he was student. The house was again raided on the Thursday and Tomás and his brother Seosamh were held for a while at Tyrellspass, then Tomás was removed to Kilmainham.²⁴ There were a total of thirty-eight persons arrested in the county but none were tried by courts-martial.²⁵ Twenty-six of these arrests were in Athlone Town.²⁶ Eight of this number were deported and interned in Frongoch.²⁷

²³ *College annual of Multyfarnham agricultural college*, (Mullingar, 1985).

²⁴ Uiseann McEoin, *Survivors*, (Dublin, 1980).

²⁵ *Intelligence reports 1913-1916*, p.241.

²⁶ *Westmeath Examiner*, May 13 1916.

²⁷ Seán O'Mahony, *Frongoch*, (Dublin, 1987), p. 212.

Preperation for the War of Independence

It is interesting to chart the progress of reports of an intelligence officer, based in the midlands over the course of a few decisive months. In October 1916, he says, 'the presence of the military and the rapid dispersal of all armed bodies in the past rebellion have put an end to all hope of success by armed opposition in the future and the extremists notice this.'²⁸ A year later he states, 'The Sinn Féin party has not yet sufficient arms of military value... No artillery, and therefore without aid from Germany, can never raise an armed force that cannot be dealt with by the troops already in this country.'²⁹ However there is a notable change in his tone by December of the same year- 'The whole Sinn Féin movement is peculiarly well disciplined, having regard to similar political organisations in the past. The results of its indoor meetings are very hard to obtain. Drunkenness is almost unknown amongst those deeply implicated, and is apparently severely dealt with. This is...foreign to the usual state of things in similar movements'³⁰ By March 1918 he reports, 'a bitter and aggressive feeling was gradually and generally being manifested towards the police in the midlands.'³¹ Sinn Féin attempted to hold a procession through Athlone on St. Patrick's Day in 1917, but the county inspector threatened them with prosecution if they proceeded with the event and they abandoned the idea.³² On Sunday 24 June, the Sinn Féin convention for Westmeath was held at the county council buildings in Mullingar, the main object was the electing of a committee for the purpose of forming Sinn Féin clubs throughout the county, Arthur Griffith and Darrell Figgis addressed the meeting.³³ About 300 people celebrated the release of prisoners in June, in Mullingar, mostly youths who marched up and down the town carrying flags and singing songs. In June, seditious literature was found being distributed at a G.A.A. match in Kinnegad and at a Ceilidh in Ballymore, the local clergy

²⁸ Charles Townshend, *The British campaign in Ireland*, (London, 1978), p.6

²⁹ Ibid. p. 6.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 7.

³¹ Ibid. p. 7.

³² CI monthly report, Mar 1917.

³³ *MRWN*, 28 Jun 1917.

influenced both.³⁴ Another Sinn Féin demonstration was held in Mullingar in July, 5000 people attended it; the main speakers were DeValera, Figgis and Ginnell. There were similar meetings held at Athlone, Moate, Castlepollard and Moyvore during the month. Further meetings followed in August, in Drumraney and Moate.³⁵ On the 30 September, 400 Sinn Féiners marched through Athlone after Requiem Mass for the late Thomas Ashe.³⁶ (Ashe was a republican prisoner, who had died when the authorities attempted to force feed him while he was on hunger strike.) Interestingly, on the 2 October, twenty boy scouts escorted two Sinn Féiners to court, who were charged with assaults on soldier's wives. During the proceedings Sinn Féin flags were unfurled and hung from the gallery.³⁷ October witnessed the first cases of groups of men marching in military formation, with a total of five separate incidents in Mullingar, Walshestown, Kilbeggan and Kinnegad. There were further large-scale meetings and cases of drilling in November; in Mullingar, Athlone, Moate, Kinnegad, Tyrellspass, Castlepollard and Kilbeggan. Sinn Féin spread like wildfire through 1917, in January there were only two clubs in existence with a total membership of forty, it grew steadily during the year and by December there were a total of twenty-four clubs with 1,238 members.³⁷

Swords are Drawn

The first reports of illegal drilling in 1918 appear in Kilbeggan and Ballynacaragy; the local parish priest supported the latter. Besides drilling the main objective of the Volunteers would obviously have to be the procurement of arms. As early as January 1918, British soldiers were been approached with this intention. Twice Joseph McMahon was arrested in Mullingar for committing this offence and on the second occasion was sent to Mountjoy, his accomplice on the first occasion was acquitted. Raids for arms, first come to the attention of the British forces in April 1918. Though it is probable that friendly locals, sympathetic to the cause, had already donated many shotguns. Illegal drilling

³⁴ *MRWN*, 21 Jun 1917, *Westmeath Examiner*, 14 Jun 1917.

³⁵ CI monthly report, Jul 1917.

³⁶ CI monthly report, Oct 1917.

³⁷ *Westmeath Examiner*, 4 Oct 1917.

³⁷ CI monthly reports, Jan and Dec 1917.

continued to increase throughout the early months of 1918 until it had reached epidemic proportions in April and May, with a total of twenty-five drills reported. This sharp increase can be attributed to the conscription crisis in March. The general population reacted strongly against this and were determined to resist it. The banners that they could all group under were Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers. Also the holding of large meetings became quite common in March and April 1918.³⁸ The first of these was on St. Patrick's Day in Mullingar, organised by Sinn Féin. The main speakers were Count Plunkett and Patrick Brett (President of Sinn Féin in Westmeath); there was little enthusiasm amongst the 1,100 onlookers. However only a month later a monster crowd numbering 10,000 gathered in Moate to attend an anti-conscription meeting. A large number of clergy attended.³⁹ On 21 March, there were twenty-one similar meetings held the length and breadth of the county.⁴⁰ There were a further eight meetings throughout the rest of the year. In December there were fourteen meetings held to canvass for the upcoming election.⁴¹

The police did not react to these open displays of nationalism for quite a while, it was not until the final week of June that they broke up a meeting at Kilbeggan, seized banners and arrested the ringleaders. During the same week, the authorities arrested eight men for illegal drilling at Moate; they were sentenced to between one and two months imprisonment, they however appealed and were released on bail.⁴² In August, there was a Sinn Féin meeting held and once again the authorities arrested the ringleaders. But the number of arrests for the rest of 1918 is alarmingly low, with just four more. This figure is surprising, especially since in October 1918, 500 people were arrested nationwide under the Defence of the Realm Act. However, the amount of illegal activity decelerated to almost a standstill in the last third of the year, with only one large meeting and absolutely no open displays of marching in a military manner. There were however, five raids for arms reported to the

³⁷ *Westmeath Examiner*, 4 Oct 1917.

³⁷ CI monthly reports, Jan and Dec 1917.

³⁸ CI monthly reports, Jan to May 1918.

³⁹ *Midland reporter and Westmeath nationalist*, (from now on referred to as MRWN), 23 Mar, 19 Apr 1918.

⁴⁰ CI monthly report, Apr 1918.

⁴¹ CI monthly reports, May – Dec 1918.

authorities all occurring in October.⁴³ This general slackening of activity is attributable to the tougher stance that the authorities began to adopt. Field Marshal Viscount French, the lord lieutenant to Ireland, issued proclamations in fourteen counties declaring Sections 3 and 4 of the 1887 Crimes Act to be in force. Under this Act he could now issue Special Proclamations naming certain organisations in these counties as 'dangerous counties'; eventually they would be declared illegal.⁴⁴ Open displays of militant nationalism were now resulting in arrest and prosecution. Compounded to this, GHQ had placed a ban upon open drilling; consequently the movement went underground and commenced small-scale training.

During the course of the year both the Irish Volunteers and Sinn Féin increased their membership considerably. The Irish Volunteers began the year with four branches and 149 members, in December they had eight branches and 750 members. Sinn Féin began the year with twenty-four branches and 1,270 members and finished the year with twenty-seven branches and 2,068 members.

Cumann na mBan increased from one branch to three, and the National boy scouts from one to two. All the other bodies remained more or less stagnant with the exception of the United Irish League whose branches declined by four and whose membership tumbled from 1,110 to 872 and the Trade and Labour League, which doubled its membership.⁴⁵ In a letter dated February 2, 1919 the Adjutant – General tells the O/C of the Athlone brigade, 'I am glad to hear that you are going ahead with the brigade work and hope you are getting things into some sort of shape. It is hoped that some of your officers will put a little more work into it than they usually do.'⁴⁶ Obviously the Volunteers in Westmeath were beginning to organise themselves.

According to Joost Augusteijn, between 1918-1920 there was a movement towards violent confrontation, most apparent in Tipperary and Dublin but not in Mayo although it had up till now been

⁴² *MRWN*, June 27, Jul 4 1918.

⁴³ CI monthly report, Oct 1918.

⁴⁴ Charles Townshend, *The British campaign in Ireland*, (Oxford, 1978), p. 10.

⁴⁵ CI monthly report, Jan and Dec 1918.

⁴⁶ Letter from A/G to O/C Athlone brigade, dated 19 Feb 1919, contained in Collins' papers (A, files), Military archives, Dublin.

equally defiant.⁴⁶ Throughout the whole of 1919 in Westmeath, there were no attacks on the R.I.C. or reports of malicious injury. In fact the police only found the necessity of baton-charging unruly crowds, in July of 1919. There were four separate incidents of rioting crowds being baton-charged, one in Athlone, one in Castlepollard, one in Delvin and one in Mullingar, all of these took place in June and July. The incident in Mullingar occurred after an Aeirideacht, when a stone-throwing crowd in military formation attacked a group of R.I.C.⁴⁷ There is further evidence to suggest that elements of the general public were becoming more militant. In August 1919, Mrs Sheehy-Skeffington attempted to address a crowd at Kilbeggan, the police baton charged the crowd, but the crowd fought back, with the result that two R.I.C. men were stabbed. Although their injuries were not serious, the incident illustrates a heightening of tensions. At first glance it would appear that nothing was being done about the shortage of arms, as there were only four raids for arms reported to the police, and all four only resulted in the procurement of three shotguns and two revolvers. It is however highly probable that more activity did take place. Drilling was now being conducted in secret and it is likely that most raids for arms were not reported to the police, as weapons were either handed over voluntarily or if this was not the case. Those who were raided were too afraid to go to the police. In July the police found out from a source that shots had been fired at the parochial house in Delvin, Father Tuite had not reported the matter and wished to keep it quiet.⁴⁸

Crown Force response to radicalisation.

It would seem that the police were well informed about the republican movement. For although there was very little activity from the republicans, the amount of arrests and subsequent imprisonment's is impressive. There were a total of twenty-eight arrests in 1919, of these fifteen were sent to prison, eight bound to the peace and five discharged. Eight of the arrests were a direct result of cattle driving; the majority of the rest were as a result of unlawful assembly or intimidation.

⁴⁶ Joost Augusteijn, *From public defiance to guerrilla warfare*, (Dublin, 1996), pp.87-123.

⁴⁷ *Westmeath Examiner*, 19 Jul 1919.

⁴⁸ CI monthly report, Jul 1919.

Most of these arrests were carried out during large meetings, of which there were a dramatic increase, there were a total of twenty-two during the year.⁴⁹ The impact of these arrests had to have had a profound effect on the republican movement; it probably wheedled out many of the more moderate members, the ones who had entered the movement for fun, as an escape from their normal, mundane rural existence. On the other hand there is no doubt that it radicalised the Volunteers who spent time in prison, and who would now be willing to adopt more radical methods. However the Volunteers developed methods, to resist the increase in the number of arrests and subsequent imprisonments. Prisoners immediately went on hunger strike with the result that they were prematurely released, jubilant crowds gathered on railway platforms cheering their return. This had the effect of transforming their releases into propaganda rallies, turning them into heroes in the eyes of the public. For example on 31 January 1919, Joseph McMahon was arrested and sent to Mountjoy, on 28 February he was accorded an enthusiastic reception at Mullingar station after been released on hunger strike.⁵⁰ However, although there was a possibility of being accorded hero status, it was no easy decision to become an active Volunteer. On 3 November 1919, the bishop of Meath brought down the curse of God on the perpetrator who shot an RIC constable in Ballivor (Co. Meath).⁵¹ In such a strictly religious society, evidence like this illustrates that Volunteer activists were at this time very much marginalised from the general public. According to O'Donoghue, the fact that there was no support from the ecclesiastical authorities and to a lesser extent the press, was a constant source of pain and heart-searching, for the Volunteers.⁵² But according to Kee, the fact that the British government never rethought their policy on Ireland, continually administering repressive measures, made it easier for Volunteer extremists to convince their moderate Sinn Féin supporters, that the fight for nationalist principles was indeed as brutal and violent as the Fenians had always said it must be.⁵³ A great example of this was the sense of outrage at the Soloheadbeg incident, being replaced by anger towards the Crown Forces for the subsequent imposition of military restrictions. Augusteijn adds to this slant ' a feeling of separateness from Britain which up till now, the Fenians had to argue was being created

⁴⁹ CI monthly reports, Jan to Dec 1919.

⁵⁰ *MRWN*, 5 Feb, 5 Mar 1919.

⁵¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 3 Nov 1919.

and consolidated by the British government with its refusal to offer Ireland anything but military force',⁵⁴

Although in the general elections of 1918, the Sinn Féin candidate Laurence Ginnell was returned with a massive majority, the general public were not for a violent campaign against the crown forces. At a meeting of the County Council in August 1919, they declared, 'We condemn in the strongest terms language can afford the murders and other outrages that have been occurring in various parts of the country. We consider every one of these crimes as a stain upon the national character of the country. We believe that they are engineered by dangerous pests of society, who have not the slightest sympathy with the welfare of the country. We hope that the solemn warnings of the Irish Catholic Hierarchy, who have expressed condemnation, will have the desired effect of putting an end to such outrages in the future'.⁵⁵

Another deterrent to becoming active was the toughening stance that the authorities had embarked on. There were eight arrests on 7 June after a gathering in Kilbeggan was forcibly dispersed and one in Castlepollard for illegal drilling. This stance was continued in the county through August 1918, when Christopher Daly was arrested in Mullingar at a Sinn Féin meeting and MJ Kennedy was arrested in Castlepollard for addressing a crowd. Raids for arms continued through 1918 but were very sporadic; three in April, one in August and five in October, drilling stopped entirely after August, a reflection of the toughening stance adopted by the authorities. The political strength of the movement however remained formidable witnessed by the large meetings that were prevalent throughout the year.⁵⁶

Augusteijn points out that some activists realised that it would take the crown forces to spur the locals into action.⁵⁷ Possession of arms was the main gripe that most companies complained about, but only the 2 areas of Kilbeggan and Mullingar embarked on more than one raid (with 11 and 8

⁵² Florence O'Donoghue, *No other law*, (Dublin, 1954).

⁵³ Robert Kee, *Ourselves alone, Volume III of the green flag*, (London, 1976), p. 78.

⁵⁴ Augusteijn, p. 70.

⁵⁵ *Westmeath Examiner*, 16 Aug 1919.

⁵⁶ CI monthly reports, Jun to Dec, 1918.

⁵⁷ Augusteijn, p.91.

respectively) during the entire war.⁵⁸ It is true, the other areas could have received weapons from sympathetic locals, but this surely could not have been so abundant a source as to rule out any other method. The other explanation is that the locals in these areas were being raided, but were too intimidated to report anything to the authorities. But with the exception of Athlone, all the other areas were much less active than Kilbeggan or Mullingar, so this would hardly be plausible.

As a result of the upsurge in violence in the country in 1920, the Crown Forces evacuated many of their more indefensible outposts thus leaving vast areas unpoliced. The policy was conducted on a national scale and therefore although Westmeath had not been active, barracks were evacuated around the county. Sixteen of the thirty-two barracks in the county were destroyed or evacuated by the end of War.⁵⁹ The Volunteers began burning these evacuated outposts to ensure that they could never be re-occupied. These burnings were an excellent means of keeping the rank and file interested, without exposing them to too much danger or risks of being arrested. It also highlighted which men could be depended on for more serious missions. To a large extent the effectiveness of individual companies was always going to depend on the capability of a small core of individuals. In some of the more active areas such as Tipperary, the emergence of violent conflict actually resulted in a dramatic decline in the organisations membership during 1920, as half-hearted members began to drop out. This was not the case in Westmeath, where the membership actually rose from 882 to 962 as an extra company was formed.⁶⁰ The fact that there was not as much activity as in other counties, would have meant that half-hearted members were not going to be called on to do anything too serious. A successful barrack attack became less and less feasible as the weakly fortified posts were abandoned, but Westmeath unlike some counties continued to attack barracks after the summer of 1920, with five of their six attacks happening after this time. A new activity was adopted nationwide - disrupting the lines of communication and transportation. This comprised of trenching roads, cutting telegraph wires and raiding the mails. Its benefits were threefold – it protected the men ‘on the run’, it provided the rank and file men with something to do and it helped procure intelligence. An epidemic of this nature

⁵⁸ This figure is compiled from a combination of CI reports and the newspaper reports of the *Westmeath Examiner and MRWN*.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

broke out in August 1920 and lasted until the truce. To quell this upsurge in violence, the British government introduced the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act in August 1920, which allowed for internment and court-martial of civilians. This led to a massive increase in the number of arrests with forty-eight arrests in September alone (forty of these however were following a raid on an arbitration court). Nineteen were arrested in October, twelve in November and five in December.⁶¹ Most active men who were not on the run already, now did so, this led to the development of the flying columns throughout the country. This meant that counties, which hitherto had been inactive, began to become more and more radical. The end of the year was characterised by an upsurge in violence. In August, an RIC constable was murdered in Athlone; in October a party of military were fired at on Lough Rea and Athlone barrack was bombed; in November Constable Larkin was murdered and Constable Ashcroft was wounded on the arm; in December an ex-soldier was taken out of his home and murdered. In Mullingar the military were held up and shot at, in two separate incidents. There were six attacks on the R.I.C. in Kilbeggan from July to December of 1920. In October, in Castlepollard, up till now an inactive area, two magistrates were kidnapped. Outside of Moate, there was an attack on a Black and Tan patrol with the result that one was killed; also in November another ex-soldier was taken out of his house and shot dead. In June 1920 there was a violent attack on Clara R.I.C. Barracks. In July Streamstown barracks was also attacked.⁶² However arrests of leading IRA officers never relented and this seriously depleted their resources. A cooling-off period occurred but only temporarily, with no attacks upon R.I.C. in January 1921.

The measures taken by the Crown Forces in 1921 had seriously reduced the number of possible targets; as a result activists began looking for alternative targets. Civilians, who were seen as responsible for Volunteer arrests, made for prime targets. There were three ex-soldiers and one informer shot dead in the county during the course of the war. Added to actual casualties, were acts of intimidation on ex-soldiers, there was an attempted murder of an ex-soldier and one had his house

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

burned down. There was also a case in Castlepollard where a man was dragged out of his home and made swear that he would not join the R.I.C.⁶³ Similar to this incident, an R.I.C. man who was on leave was warned to not return to the force he subsequently tendered his resignation.⁶⁴

Approaching the end of 1920, most flying columns were disbanded and the men returned to their battalions, where they became involved in small operations. These men however had become far more radicalised and they brought this influence to bear in their local areas, so instead of activity dissipating, it continued. A slackening off period did occur in January, but attacks on the Crown Forces continued thereafter. With two in February, three in March, five in April, six in May, six in June and four in July.

ALL BETS ARE OFF

In January 1920, the Volunteer Executive endorsed violent attacks upon crown forces. The delegation sent to the Paris Peace Conference had failed to gain any international support and in September the Dáil had been suppressed. So it appeared to the movement, that political means had failed, the only way now to pursue independence was through militant action. GHQ sent out orders to all of its provincial brigades, to destroy all government communication and administrative instruments.

Volunteers in Kilbeggan on New Years day raided six homes, (one was actually on New Years Eve) searching for arms. They managed to gain five shotguns and a number of sporting cartridges. In one of the raids when they failed to procure arms, they fired shots in annoyance or frustration and left. The CI states 'none of the occupants could identify them (but) of course they knew who they are but are intimidated'. Also on New Years Eve, three motorcars were fired at, in three separate incidents in Mullingar.⁶⁵ On 19 January, a civilian was shot at and the first attack upon the RIC occurred. A car belonging to wealthy businessman P.J. Weymes, was fired at about a half a mile from Mullingar, the chauffeur was wounded by shards of glass. The police immediately set about investigating the incident and were fired upon. They captured three of their four assailants; finding a Smith & Wesson

⁶³ CI monthly report, Aug 1920.

⁶⁴ CI monthly report, Oct 1920.

⁶⁵ CI monthly report, Jan 1920.

revolver on one, ammunition on another and seditious literature upon the third. Micheal McCoy, Patrick Byrne and Terence Smith were removed to Mountjoy; a large crowd gathered on the platform and cheered as they left.⁶⁷ An escalation in activity occurred throughout the county. There were twenty-one cases of blocking roads, five cases of malicious damage, six raids for arms, three cases of intimidation and one attack upon the mails in the month of January. Two young men were detained under the Defence Of the Realm Act (DORA) – Joseph McMahon and Christopher Whelehan both of Mullingar, McMahon was discharged but Whelehan was sent to Mountjoy, the following week he was released, he was carried from the Mullingar court shoulder high.⁶⁸ On 18 March, a young Volunteer named Stephen McGuinness was arrested in Kilbeggan on charges of illegal drilling. While he was been tried inside the courthouse a large group of Volunteers paraded outside in military formation cheering.⁶⁹ These two incidents, especially the first, illustrate that public opinion was changing to some extent, as regards the escalation in aggressiveness adopted by the Volunteers.

Seamus O'Meara a butcher from Athlone, O/C of the Athlone brigade, states that he was called to a meeting at GHQ in Dublin at the end of 1919, and was told that it was time that the Volunteers became more active, he was ordered to lead attacks on police barracks from February 1920. At a brigade council meeting it was decided that they would attack the police barracks at Ballymore on 26 February. O'Meara picked men and officers from the Athlone and Coosan areas. Six of them were from the Summerhill area (Co.Meath) and some of the officers were from the Faheeran (Co.Offaly) company. The mission was botched, when the local Volunteers, who were responsible for bringing the rifles bolted when they saw the lights of a British lorry and suspected that it was a raid. O'Meara states,

'Some men were court-martialed for what happened. It is only fair to realise that while some men were willing to fight, they did not like the fight to be near their own houses. Not everybody was prepared to risk his people's home especially at that time.'

⁶⁷ *MRWN*, 22 Jan 1920.

⁶⁸ *MRWN*, 17 Jan 1920.

⁶⁹ *MRWN*, 18 Mar 1920.

He continues to detail that he was responsible for the planning of the southern part of the county along with first battalion south Roscommon.⁷⁰ This practice of companies from different counties bonding together, would tend to point to the fact that there were not enough dedicated or capable activists within the county and that they needed to draft in activists from other areas.

GHQ ordered burning of courthouses and evacuated barracks, and raiding of tax offices for Easter 1920. These were the first operations for many of the up till now dormant companies. They really separated the rank and file, between those who were willing to carry out daring actions and those who were not. Small groups of activists, small pockets of individuals who were willing to risk life and take life, to achieve their goal, carried out military operations. Other men who were listed as members of the company were only used for mundane jobs. The CI reported in May 1921, 'I am of the opinion that the average strength of a company is between 10-15 and of this number only a percentage are dangerous'.⁷¹ The lack of arms reinforced this strategy as only a few men could operate at any one time anyway. Violence continued to mount; the CI recorded forty-two indictable offences in May 1920.⁷² Rumpf and Hepburn, argue that the presence of a bellicose and charismatic leader made all the difference in the amount of activity in an area.⁷³ Seamus O'Meara had been called to GHQ at the end of 1919, where he was ordered to force the Volunteers in his brigade area to become more active.⁷⁴ The initial results were poor with failed ambushes and no cases of the burning of evacuated barracks. In May he promised progress, GHQ replied 'you will agree it is not up to your neighbouring brigades.'⁷⁵ He obviously had been purposely vague to GHQ, to cover up the incompetence of his brigade, as in this same letter the A/G states 'you say the barracks were burned to the ground. Could you be more definite and let me know the exact number that were burned.

⁷⁰ Seamus O'Meara, chapter entitled 'Some activities in Westmeath in 1920', *Capuchin Annual* 1970, p.548.

⁷¹ CI monthly report, May 1921.

⁷² CI monthly report, May 1920.

⁷³ E Rumpf and A.C.Hepburn, *Nationalism and socialism in twentieth century Ireland*, (Liverpool, 1977), pp.41-42.

⁷⁴ Seamus O'Meara, *Capuchin Annual*, 1970, p.548.

⁷⁵ Letter from A/G to O/C, dated May 1920, contained in the Collins papers, in Military Archives.

Would this not be a clearer way to make your report?'⁷⁶ after this letter, the IRA did begin to become bolder in their methods of establishing their authority on the county –

'During a local election in Mullingar members of IRA stationed themselves outside the polling booths for police duty. They commandeered the County Hall in the name of the Irish Republic and converted it into a temporary barracks. The Republican soldiers arrested a number of persons for riotous conduct and locked them in the guardroom of the County Hall.'⁷⁷

There were two attacks on RIC barracks at Clara (Co. Offaly) on the 2 June, and at Crazy Corner (Mullingar area) on the 23 June. For the attack on Clara, trees were felled and placed on the road to prevent military assistance arriving from Athlone. A Volunteer named Patrick Seery from Ballinagore was killed during this attack.⁷⁸ (Mentioned above as been involved in cattle driving in 1908). Crazy Corner barracks had been evacuated and although it was not burnt to the ground, it was smashed up enough to make it uninhabitable. Also on the twelfth, the military and police at Ballnacargy noticed the courthouse was on fire but were able to bring the blaze under control before it caused too much damage. I realise that this is not enough evidence to equate the increased activity in Westmeath solely with O'Meara, but it does point to the fact that he was quite a capable officer who possessed some powers of motivation. Other examples of the departure from minor acts of disturbance occurred on the fourth of the month. Two lines of railway were removed between Inny Junction and Streete, with the result that a train was derailed, miraculously nobody was injured, the motive was to facilitate an attack on the local police barracks which in the end did not take place. Also on the fourth, Gaulstown house was burnt to the ground, it had been unoccupied for two years but rumour had spread that the military were about to reoccupy it. The month finished with another decisive blow against the Crown Forces, when 4,000 gallons of petrol consigned for the Royal Air Force at Oranmore, Co. Galway were destroyed at Mullingar railway station. The RIC received a call from the employees of the railway at three o'clock in the morning stating that one hundred armed men had held them up.

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ London's Daily Sketch Jun 3, contained in *MRWN*, June 1920

⁷⁸ Jeremiah Sheehan, *Worthies of Westmeath*, (Moate, 1987), p.113.

The police arrived on the scene and managed to salvage 1,250 gallons, they suspected however that the railway employees had carried out the damage with the help of some civilians.⁷⁹ Besides these attacks on the Crown forces, there were a lot of offences carried out by the civil population. There were five cattle drives during the month at Ballynacarrigy, Castletown-Geogheon, Ballagh, Castlepollard and Mountemple. The leaders of the Castletown drive were named as Patick Tuite, James Spollen and Owen Reilly; these men were however all prominent Sinn Féiners. Intimidation and sending of threatening letters was also prevalent, creating an aura of fear around the county for those who were enemies of the IRA.⁸⁰

On 8 July major security precautions were taken to ensure the peaceful holding of the Assizes at Mullingar. According to one report the 'courthouse was taken over by military... Sentries were placed in front of the courthouse.... Armed soldiers taking positions in the indoor of the building facing the streets.'⁸¹ Six evacuated barracks were burnt to the ground at Glasson, Littleton, Killucan, Delvin, Streamstown, and Brawney during the month of July. Streamstown barracks was attacked on the twenty-fifth.⁸² According to the CI, between eighty and ninety armed men carried out the attack. Supposedly a sergeant and two constables, successfully fought off this highly unlikely number. Seamus O'Meara was involved in the attack, along with officers and men from the second and third battalions. According to his account, they ambushed two RIC men on their way to mass at Boher. Two of the Volunteers disguised themselves in their uniforms. By O'Meara's account only ten Volunteers were involved. When they arrived at the barracks they noticed the steel shutters were pulled down. They realised that the police would have called for assistance and they had less than an hour before military assistance would arrive from Mullingar. They attempted an attack but failed and withdrew when the military arrived. The military escorted the police to Mullingar and the Faheeran

⁷⁹ CI monthly report, Jun 1920.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ *MRWN*, 8 Jul 1920.

company burned down the barracks the next night.⁸³ On the last day of the month Constable McDonald of the R.I.C. was held up and robbed in Rochfortbridge.⁸⁴

To combat the escalation of violence that was occurring in certain parts of the county, the British government introduced the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act, which was passed on the 9 August 1920, allowing for the internment and court-martial of civilians.⁸⁵ In some parts of the country this resulted in a large number of arrests. There was no immediate flurry of arrests in the month of August or September in Westmeath, but in October there were fourteen IRA arrested.⁸⁶

As mentioned above, in August Volunteer Forces carried out the first murder of a member of the Crown Forces. An R.I.C. sergeant named Thomas Craddock was singled out because he had taken part in 'the burning of Cunningham's house and in the beating of the owner.... if he was left alive we believed a lot of the town would be burned down.'⁸⁷ He was killed while leaving the ex-soldiers hall in King's Street, Athlone at midnight in early August. There was another policeman with him named Mahon but he managed to escape.⁸⁸ After the murder the Curfew order was placed on large parts of the town. There were three further attacks upon the R.I.C. in August. On 3 August, a bicycle patrol consisting of five RIC was ambushed between Kilbeggan and Rochfortbridge, by what the CI describes as a large party of masked and armed men. Constable John Phelps was shot in the arm but they managed to fight off their assailants wounding some of them in the process. On the 24 August, Constable William Grier was held up in a Kilbeggan pub by three armed and masked men and relieved of his revolver and seven rounds of ammunition. Another constable was shot at but not hit, in Collinstown (Castlepollard area). Lawlessness continued to prevail throughout the month, especially with a massive increase in the holding up and stealing of mails of which there were six cases.⁸⁹ Also in August, Sgt. Brennan retired on pension. Constable Roche was suspended for refusal to carry arms and

⁸² CI monthly report, Aug 1920.

⁸³ Seamus O'Meara, *Capuchin Annual*, 1970, p.550.

⁸⁴ CI monthly report, Aug 1920.

⁸⁵ Townshend, *The British campaign in Ireland*, p.103-105.

⁸⁶ CI monthly reports Aug – Oct 1920.

⁸⁷ Seamus O'Meara, *Capuchin Annual*, 1970, p.550.

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ CI report monthly report, Aug 1920.

Constable McGovern resigned on the same grounds. Both refused to carry arms as they claimed that it was 'tantamount to a challenge to the people.'⁹⁰

CROWN FORCE RESPONSE TO OPEN WARFARE

This leads us to examine the way in which the county was policed and how the authorities' reaction to the situation, resulted in the escalation of violence. Many of the population had lost faith in these representatives of British authority in Ireland, the IRA through persuasion and intimidation had convinced the general populace that they were the defenders of the community, as a result these two forces became bitter enemies vying for a position that they regarded as rightfully theirs. The government had made many blunders in policy, which helped the Volunteers gather further support. People had regarded the arrests of the people in Athlone after the Rising as unjust, because they had not engaged in any violent activity. There was a ban issued by the military in July 1917, forbidding drilling, the wearing of uniforms, singing nationalist songs; basically forbidding all the paraphernalia that was representative of the Volunteer movement. But in reality it was impossible to arrest people for these minor offences, simply because there were too many people involved. The authorities attempted to maintain order by arresting the leader figures, this failed however as an appearance in court or a spell in prison was considered something of a status symbol, defining loyalty to the movement. The court cases themselves became propaganda events. Most activists were not deterred by their convictions. Some of them strengthened by previous prison experience immediately went on hunger strike to demand political prisoner status. After the death of Thomas Ashe in Mountjoy, through being force-fed, political status was granted in most prisons and to avoid creating martyrs, many prisoners were released way before their time. To re-impose some sort of threat, the Temporary Discharges Act or the Cat-and-Mouse Act, was put into force in March 1918. By this Act, it became possible to release hunger strikers and when they had fully recovered, they could be re-arrested and forced to serve the remainder of their sentence. There were raids for arms at this stage but only in

⁹⁰ *MRWN*, 5 Aug 1920.

preparation for a confrontation, or to provide the Volunteers with greater political clout. Hardly anybody at this stage was prepared to kill. Many counties had followed the Sinn Féin guideline issued in April 1919, which directed that police should be boycotted. But there is no evidence to suggest that Westmeath treated the police any different until as late as August 1920, although there were calls by political leaders within the county for a boycott. On 27 April 1919, Ginnell and Fr. O'Flanagan addressed 500 members of the Gaelic League in Delvin and advocated boycotting the police.⁹¹

The closure of outlying barracks and centralising manpower led to a further decrease in the power the RIC exerted over the local population. As early as January 1921, the CI was calling for barracks that had been closed a couple of months earlier, to be re-opened to assert control over lawless areas.⁹² To curtail this spiralling escalation of violence, the government brought in the military and increased their powers to search houses and intern suspects. Added to the new powers they were reinforced by new recruits from England, in the form of the infamous paramilitary units, namely the Auxiliaries and the Black and Tans. These units became infamous for their harsh treatment of the general population, which had the effect of turning anybody not already a sympathiser of the IRA into one.

The Restoration of Order Act was introduced in August of 1920. But the IRA did not abate, in November 1920 there was a massive increase in activity but now with the presence of the new paramilitary organisations, November also witnessed the beginning of retaliatory measures by the Crown Forces in Westmeath.

FORMATION OF FLYING COLUMNS

The police definitely stepped up operations at the end of 1920 in Westmeath, with a total of twenty-four arrests of 'leading' IRA men between October and December 1920. However this did not have the effect of lessening activity in the more extreme pockets of the county.⁹³ Attacks on the RIC and on their barracks continued until the end of the year. The increased arrests and raids on homes did

⁹¹ CI monthly report, Apr 1919.

⁹² CI monthly report, Jan 1921.

⁹³ CI monthly reports, Oct to Dec 1920.

have the effect of forcing many of the Volunteers to leave their homes and go on the run. This was the start of the forming of the flying columns. There is evidence to suggest, that there were three flying columns operating within the county. But none were solely a Westmeath operation. The very famous North Longford flying column ran sorties in and out of Westmeath territory, and had an outpost at Finea. Colonel Seamus Conway decided to move the column in the direction of Streete in Co. Westmeath, to carry out a small engagement there with a view to luring a transport patrol from Castlepollard to Rathowen. He states that they ambushed a Tan patrol at Streete wounding one of them, he says, 'that this was just a bait to catch a larger fish', but the truce was called two days later.⁹⁴ There was another column that operated between south Westmeath, south Roscommon and north King's county. Since early 1919, the south Roscommon and south Westmeath Volunteer units had co-operated as the Athlone brigade.⁹⁵ A third column operated on the Meath border led by a man named Michael Finn. The third battalion, fourth Meath brigade, was centred in Delvin.⁹⁶ However it is important to point out that in the fifth Division's intelligence they made no mention of any of these when they were listing Flying Columns in their area.⁹⁷ Their intelligence would most certainly have known of the existence of any active columns, perhaps they did not believe that any of these columns were a massive threat and that they could be contained by local forces.

In October, the CI opens his report on an optimistic note stating that activity is beginning to slacken and that good feeling is eventually been shown to the police. But this runs contrary to the evidence of what was going on in the county. The court at Mullingar Quarter sessions had to be abandoned due to lack of jurors. On the twenty-ninth, all work was suspended throughout the county to commemorate the death of the Lord Mayor of Cork. The nineteenth, saw the setting up of a flying column in the county. James Tormey, an ex-British soldier was selected as column commander. Altogether there were five ex-British soldiers in the column. There were three further attacks upon the

⁹⁴ McEoin papers, statement of Volunteer Seamus Conway.

⁹⁵ Seamus O'Meara, *Capuchin Annual* 1970, p.548.

⁹⁶ There is some confusion here as Hannah Fitzsimions claims in her book *The Great Delvin* (no date or location of publication provided), p.99, that Delvin was part of the Third Brigade and were led by a man named Seamus Finn, but Oliver Coogan in his book *Politics and War in Meath 1913-23*. (Dublin, 1983), p.139, states what is listed above.

⁹⁷ Jeudwine papers, file no.72/82/2.

Crown forces, but for the first time the military were attacked which illustrates a growing confidence on the part of the Volunteers. On 7 October, a party of military were returning from a boat trip on Lough Rea when they were fired upon from the shore near Coosan. A Major Adams, a Lieutenant Hudson and Privates Allport and Bradley, of the 1st Leicester Regiment were all wounded.⁹⁸ The report states that 50-60 men attacked them, which is highly improbable. There were four arrests made immediately after the attack. Seamus O'Meara states that the attack was carried out as a reprisal for the burning of the premises of the *Westmeath Independent*, by Black and Tans. Members of the Coosan company carried out the ambush.⁹⁹

E-company of the first battalion was situated in Faheeran, Tubber parish, County Offaly and was in the Athlone brigade area. Their intelligence had established that a police convoy was to pass through Moate on the twenty-second of the month. It was decided that they would ambush it at 11 a.m. at Parkwood. It was to be conducted by the Flying Column. The convoy consisted of three Crossley Tenders and one motorcar. The ambush was botched as they only managed to stop one of the tenders. They killed the driver and severely wounded another. The original plan had been to seize their lorries, arms and ammunition, put on the occupant's uniforms and attempt to bluff their way into the barracks at Moate. On the night of the ambush an official statement was issued from Dublin Castle stating that, 'A party of police numbering nineteen were ambushed at Parkwood, King's county. A rifle bullet killed the driver of one of the cars and another constable was slightly wounded. The fire was returned and one of the attacking party was seen to fall.'

At about seven in the evening the Tans left Parkwood to return to Athlone. Along the way they fired wildly and indiscriminately into houses. Many families left the town that night, while the Crown Forces patrolled the streets and searched houses; they shot two civilians, one in Moate and one in Athlone.¹⁰⁰ The CI states that 'he military were heated and it is alleged that shots were fired at

⁹⁸ Names received from Collins Papers in Military Archives, file no. A/0437.

⁹⁹ Seamus O'Meara, *Capuchin Annual* 1970, p.551.

¹⁰⁰ Liam Cox, *Moate, County Westmeath. A history of town and district*, (Athlone, 1981), pp.181-186.

them.¹⁰¹ After this engagement the flying column was split up, five men were sent to Moate, two to the third battalion and two to the first battalion with orders to shoot any police or Black and Tan they could.¹⁰²

Continued escalation in violence, in October.

On the sixth, Constable Corbett at Finea shot a farmer named Patrick Thompson dead. The constable was of duty at the time, but he was not convicted of any crime because there was not enough evidence against him.¹⁰³ Two weeks later, the Cavan to Mullingar train was stopped by ten armed men, who stated that they were searching for Constable Corbett, fortunately for him he was not unboard.¹⁰⁴ Another action, which shows that the Volunteers were beginning to become more audacious, was the kidnapping of two magistrates, Scott Moore R.M. and G.P. Hyde J.P, while on their way to Petty Sessions at Castlepollard. They were released the next day, however fourteen arrests were promptly made, twelve of whom were identified as connected to the crime and sent immediately to prison where one died.¹⁰⁵ The deceased was named as Michael Flynn of Glanidan, according to a newspaper report he was subjected to harsh conditions and other alleged cruelties.¹⁰⁶ So it would seem that very militant actions were reacted to with the herding up of all local suspected activists. Although the same newspaper maintains that Flynn was in no way politically involved. On the sixteenth of the month, a bomb was thrown at the police barracks in Athlone, one constable was slightly injured. The evacuated police barrack at Ballinea was destroyed on the twenty-seventh.¹⁰⁷ The CI concludes his report stating 'that the police and military are becoming stronger and breaking them (the Volunteers) up.'¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ CI monthly report, Oct 1920

¹⁰² Seamus O'Meara, *Capuchin Annual* 1970, p.552.

¹⁰³ *Westmeath Examiner*, Oct – Nov 1920.

¹⁰⁴ CI monthly report, Oct 1920.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *MRWN*, 27 Oct 1920, 4 Nov 1920.

¹⁰⁷ *Westmeath Examiner*, 27 Oct 1920.

¹⁰⁸ CI monthly report, Oct 1920.

The CI opens up his report for November with,

‘Sinn Féin and other organisations do not have public meeting in halls as before. They.... have many opportunities of interchanging ideas such as on Divine Service on Sundays. The next arrests of leading IRA men are likely to have a good effect.’

On the twenty-third and fourth, arrests were made of leading IRA men, they were immediately taken into military custody.¹⁰⁹ On the 2 November, a Black and Tan named Larkin was killed during an ambush at Auburn near Athlone. He was part of a party that was on their way from Carrick-on – Shannon to Athlone, for the purpose of attending a court-martial. Three other constables were wounded and one Volunteer named Seamus Finn was killed. Local Volunteers from the Ballymore company carried out this attack, members of the Drumaney and Tang companies helped them; all of which were attached to the third battalion, Athlone brigade. There were three rifles and twenty shotguns for the twenty-three volunteers that were involved, again highlighting the number of Volunteers being used as being totally reliant on the number of weapons available. It is interesting to note that Fr. Casey the local priest gave them his blessing and general absolution before they left. Displaying a changing attitude if not in the Church, at least in the views of the priests at local level.¹¹⁰ The day before a Sgt. Walker of the East Yorkshire Regiment, was held up on Grove St. in Mullingar and searched, but he had no arms in possession. On the same night two shots were fired at a military sergeant in Mullingar. On the fourth, a constable Ashcroft was shot on the arm and on the thigh, the incident happened immediately after the police had searched Lawrence McGuire's licensed premises.¹¹¹ On the same night, an ex-soldier named White was shot and critically injured, in Clara by the military.¹¹² In October-November 1920, a dramatic difference can be noticed in the pattern of the war. Retaliatory tactics by Crown Forces really only begin in earnest. From October 1920 to the Truce, there were seven cases of arson, nineteen cases of a malicious damage and three cases of murdering civilians. But the real figure would be much higher due to the fact that my estimation is heavily reliant

¹⁰⁹ CI monthly report, Nov 1920.

¹¹⁰ Patsy Muarry, *Beneath the Shadow of Uisneach*, (Mullingar, 1996), p.181-182.

¹¹¹ Ibid

on what the CI includes in his reports. The military were also forcing civilians to repair roads during the day, which they had probably being forced by the IRA, the night before to trench. O'Meara says that the military burned houses in Drum and Moore, as reprisals for the Auburn ambush and that they entered two pubs in Athlone and four houses in the surrounding area and broke them up.¹¹³ However, the IRA was also marshaling its own reign of terror on the civilian population. Martin Lyons, an ex-soldier was taken out of his house in Moate and shot dead, as it was known he was friendly with the police. Also the house of Peter Judge was entered, he received three bullet wounds, he was a known thief around the town of Kinnegad.¹¹⁴ On the 15 November, barracks were evacuated at Ballinagore, Crazy Corner, Stoneyford, Moyvore, Lisclogher, Coole and Fardrum.¹¹⁵ This further increased the lack of control that the Crown Forces had on the county as it left greater areas of land unpoliced and subject to IRA control.

The CI eventually admits in December, that the county is in an unsatisfactory state. Malicious injuries, arson, robberies of mails, cutting of roads and telephone wires and a case of attempted murder comprise the chief crimes. The case of attempted murder was of an ex-soldier named Anderson in Delvin. An RIC man was fired at and wounded on the arm in Kilbeggan, once again retaliatory measures continue, the county at this stage had really fallen into a state of general lawlessness with both sides causing malicious damage to property. Sinn Féiners shot Jas Blagriff, under the suspicion that he was an informer. The CI estimated that there are about eighty members of the IRA are on the run at this time.¹¹⁶

The high number of arrests continues into 1921, with fifteen men interned during the month of January, there were also five men committed for the offences of courts-martial, possession of firearms and possession of seditious literature.¹¹⁷ In February, the authorities noticed some improvement in the

¹¹² *MRWN*, Nov 4 1920.

¹¹³ Seamus O'Meara, *Capuchin Annual* 1970, p.552.

¹¹⁴ CI monthly report, Nov 1920.

¹¹⁵ *Westmeath Examiner*, 15 Nov 1920.

¹¹⁶ CI monthly report, Dec 1920.

¹¹⁷ CI monthly report, Jan 1921.

centre of the county but the borders adjoining other counties were still in a bad way.¹¹⁸ A body was found in a shallow grave in Clonmacnoise (Co. Offaly) graveyard, it was identified as that of James Tormey aged 21, an ex-British soldier who had commanded the ASU (Active Service Unit), first battalion, Athlone brigade. The authorities believed the man was shot on 2 February, when a party of eight police was attacked at Cornafulla, near Creggan (Co. Roscommon). It is also learned in this report that his brother Joesph Tormey who was captured at the end of 1920 was shot dead by a sentry in Ballykinlar internee camp on January 1921.¹¹⁹ The bad areas at this stage were outlined as Castlepollard, where the main activity engaged was the cutting of the roads; Kilbeggan and Athlone were engaged in the more serious activities of raids and ambushes. Three huge operations conducted by the military using 100-150 men yielded no results. They began to resort to smaller-scale operations of twenty to thirty men, which produced seventeen important arrests.¹²⁰

In March, disruption of transport and communication lines continued, especially in the Castlepollard area, the C.M.A prohibited markets and fairs there. The most dangerous part of the county was that which bordered King's County. There were no Crown forces there, and it became a haven for men on the run. Also there was constantly drilling on the borders of Co. Meath. Fifteen people were arrested during the month and there was evidence to bring seven to trial by court-martial, the rest were interned. Two people were committed by courts-martial during the month, for illegal possession of firearms. There was an attack upon a patrol of police, which included Captain Corbett DI, on the Kilbeggan/Mullingar road. They successfully fought off their attackers and claimed that they wounded a few in the process. Also at Kilbeggan on 2 March, a single, military dispatch rider was held up and relieved of his motorcycle. On the fourteenth of the month at Castlepollard special Constable Clarke was fired at but not hit.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ CI monthly report, Feb 1921.

¹¹⁹ Liam Cox, p. 186.

¹²⁰ CI monthly report, Feb 1921.

A type of epidemic of violence breaks out in April and lasts right until the truce. The CI amazingly opens his report stating that, 'I believe that the public are tired and see that Sinn Féin are beaten.' Yet on the very first day of the month there was an attack upon Kinnegad R.I.C. barracks, attempting to intimidate them into ceasing their investigations and for the arrest of the local Volunteer named Beglan¹²² (who subsequently escaped)¹²³. The R.I.C. suffered no injury, but they believed that they inflicted casualties upon their attackers. Also on the first of the month, Lance-corporal Sydney Freakly was shot on the arm as he was cycling through Athlone, four arrests were made in relation to this incident.¹²⁴ A hand-to-hand struggle occurred on the Conaught side of Athlone, between two R.I.C. and two Volunteers. The police officers were wounded, but not seriously and one of the attackers was shot three times.¹²⁵ There were a total of thirty-nine indictable offences during the month. Other serious crimes included the murder of a Robert Johnston in Moydrum; the CI states that it was done for the purpose of spreading intimidation. Rochfortbridge barracks was also subjected to a sniping attack. The CI states, 'the recrudescence of attacks on Crown Forces, a form of outrage which the county has been free from the some months, is probably due to the presence of an ASU Unit on the Meath border.' There were eighteen arrests for political offences, five of which were convicted by courts-martial, receiving sentences ranging from twelve months to five years. Evacuated RIC barracks at Johnstown and Collinstown were destroyed.¹²⁶

There were three attacks upon the RIC during the month of May. On the seventh, police were ambushed at Rathowen. The fight lasted one hour and then the raiders fled. However they only succeeded in wounding one constable. Another attack took place at Kinnegad, when two police were ambushed, according to the police report they fought gallantly and managed to wound one of their assailants and capture another. The CI estimates that at this time, each company was only ten to

¹²¹ CI monthly report, Mar 1921.

¹²² CI monthly report, Apr 1921.

¹²³ Hannah Fitzsimons, *The Great Delvin*.

¹²⁴ CI monthly report, Apr 1921.

¹²⁵ *MRWN*, Apr 14 1921.

¹²⁶ CI monthly report, Apr 1921.

fifteen strong and that only a small percentage of these men were actually dangerous.¹²⁷ The impetus for the Rathowen ambush would seem to rest with members of the North Longford flying column.¹²⁸ An R.I.C. man was murdered in Ballinacarrigy when he was set upon by a group of about 50 men.¹²⁹ Nine arrests were made during the month, four of which were dealt with by court-martial, the rest were to be interned.¹³⁰

There were thirty outrages reported during the month of June, but the CI believed that there were many more in remote parts of the county of which nothing had yet been heard. The escalation in violence continued to spiral, with the murder of Head Constable James McElhill in Kilbeggan and the murder of Col. Commandant Lambert in Coosan (Athlone) on June 20.¹³¹ The original motive had been to kidnap Lambert and use him as a bartering tool for the release of the then captured Sean McEoin (leader of Volunteer forces in Longford) but when they failed to stop the car in which Lambert was travelling in, they shot him instead. The capture of McEoin was a serious blunder on behalf of the Mullingar Volunteers; they had been informed that the train on which he was travelling on was to be searched on arrival in Mullingar to look for him. They were supposed to stop the train at the Downs and get McEoin to safety. Although the battalion officer who received these orders was arrested the night before, the orders still reached the local company but they did not act upon them. The result was that McEoin was captured and seriously wounded upon his arrival in Mullingar.¹³² An intelligence officer in the Mullingar brigade, emphasised how grave this insubordination was - 'an event that affected the entire movement and that may have damned the Mullingar company ever since.'¹³³ GHQ was furious at this incompetence, they ordered that McEoin was to be rescued, local companies lay waiting on the routes to Dublin to ambush the entourage that was removing McEoin to Dublin. But the military were wise to the fact that attempts would be made to rescue their prisoner and

¹²⁷ CI monthly report, May 1921.

¹²⁸ O'Malley notebooks, U.C.D. archives, statement of Volunteer Francis Davis, file no. p17b/121.

¹²⁹ Richard Abbott, *Police casualties in Ireland*, (Cork and Dublin, 2000), p. 231.

¹³⁰ CI monthly report, May 1921

¹³¹ CI monthly report, Jun 1920.

¹³² Padraic O'Farrell, *The Blacksmith of Ballinlee, the life of Sean McEoin*, (Dublin and Cork, 1981), pp. 46-48.

¹³³ James Hynes, letter in private hands submitted to the Pensions Board in 1958, contained in Patrica Gibney, 'The military in Mullingar', (unpublished diploma in local history, NUI Maynooth, 1998)

they took an alternative route to the city.¹³⁴ After the murder of McElhill, Lambert himself imposed a strict curfew on the county consisting of 'except in the Urban Districts of Athlone and Mullingar. All persons shall remain indoors between the hours of 2230 hours and 0500 hours and that within the Urban Districts of Athlone and Mullingar, all persons shall remain indoors between 2300 and 0500.' Two days after Lambert had released this statement he too was dead. After Lambert's murder, Lieut. -Colonel Challenor imposed further restrictions. He banned the use of cycles in certain parts of the county; he forced licensed premises in Glasson and Ballydeeran to close their doors at 1800 hours each day.¹³⁵ Although General Jeudwine stated that 'his brigade will best avenge his death...By strict adherence...no reprisals', a week later the Black and Tans burned five farmhouses in Coosan, they then moved onto Mountemple and burned Anne Hannaly's house, her son was in prison for IRA activity.¹³⁶ On 3 July, sixty armed men surrounded the home of Lord Castlemaine at Moydrum, gave the occupants five minutes to get out and then burned it to the ground, causing one hundred and fifty thousand pounds worth of damage.¹³⁷ Augusteijn relates how Peter Hart revealed that at first glance all these cases of malicious damage appear as random, unconnected attacks but on closer analysis they become a series of interlocking reprisals.¹³⁸ An audacious plan had also been hatched to kidnap Granville Wilson of Street, as he was a first cousin of Sir Henry Wilson and would therefore be a very valuable hostage. However the plan was botched and Granville left the country. Once again the trend of the authorities keeping astride of the escalating violence is illustrated in the huge amount of arrests that they succeeded in making. There were twenty-eight political arrests during the month, five of which resulted in courts-martial, the rest were interned. Also two IRA men, who had been on the run were committed to penal servitude for life. The CI sincerely believed that the general population were tired of the lawlessness – 'I feel that there would be a chance of this becoming more articulate if (1) the press were prevented from assuring the people that the Black and Tans are responsible for the lawlessness and (2) that the county was quite sure the government meant to put down the lawlessness

¹³⁴ Padraic O'Farrell, pp.49-50.

¹³⁵ Jeudwine papers, file no. 72/82/2, Appendix xv(e) and xv(d).

¹³⁶ Lecture by Dr. Terence Dooley in NUI Maynooth, Nov 2000.

and not deliver them over to some settlement to the authors of this lawlessness.’ He also cites obstacles that are preventing him achieving better results. He states that he needs more men and also a different method for dealing with cases, because the methods he has to use are too cumbersome. For example a court-martial practically put a whole district force out of action for two days and every summons served took a patrol of eight instead of the former number of one. On 9 July, there was considerable mobilisation to prevent witnesses getting to Dublin. The road was mined two miles west of Kinnegad, however it exploded prematurely and the rebels fled. Other serious crimes included the exchange of fire between a patrol from Kilbeggan and armed rebels on the King’s border. The matter ended with the fleeing of the rebels and the finding of a ‘Sam Browne’ hat with a bullet through it. On the twenty-seventh, the courthouse at Ballymore was burned to prevent Petty Sessions been held. There was also an incident of a big house burning when the mansion of Major Tuite was razed to the ground.¹³⁹ Also at Creggan, Athlone forty men burned down the house of Captain Davin who was in England at the time of the occurrence. There were three more attacks upon Crown forces. One at Ballymore and one at Drumraney, in both of these cases, nobody was injured and the raiders escaped without a trace. However on the third of the month the police found the body of a man outside Kilbeggan. There were several bullet holes in the body and the words “spy [sic] and informers beware of the IRA” were attached. On the eleventh the courthouse at Castlepollard, was burned to the ground, because it was been used as a British court. Four days later at 11:30, there was an attack on the police barrack in Castlepollard. The CI states, that although the attack was unexpected the large number of raiders were defeated and fled the scene, he also believes that a number of the rebels were wounded. This attack occurred on the actual day of the truce, in fact during the period from the first to the eleventh, the IRA was particularly active. The CI states that ‘though the newspapers inaugurated the spirit of the truce some days before it came and military orders inaugurate did two days before it was due, the IRA kept up the attempt to murder police till the strike of noon on (the) 11th: from this an ill

¹³⁷ Ibid

¹³⁸ Augusteijn, p.246-247.

¹³⁹ CI monthly report, Jun 1921.

augury for peace is drawn.’¹⁴⁰ During the attack on the barrack, fire was directed chiefly on offices occupied by the DI and HC, which pointed to a deliberate attempt to take their lives on the hour before the commencement of the truce. Also on the ninth there was an ambush at Streete conducted mainly by the North Longford Flying column, they succeeded in wounding a Black and Tan.¹⁴¹

CONCLUSION

What is written above is a chronological account of the activities of the Irish Volunteers in Westmeath, during the War of Independence. There is evidence to support the idea that there did exist a core of very radical Volunteers who were willing to take life and to endanger their own, to achieve a Republic. However they were isolated from the general public, because of their methods. Apart from the hotbeds of activity – Kilbeggan, Moate, Castlepollard, Mullingar and Athlone, the rest of the county was satisfied with minor acts of defiance. There is no doubt that Sinn Féin had widespread support throughout the county and that an anti-British feeling was prevalent. Recruiting for the British Army remained at virtually nil for the duration of the period; there was a general adherence to the institutions of alternative, republican government; there were numerous public demonstrations in support of the republicans, returning prisoners received rapturous welcomes and the election results were positively republican. But the majority of the general public were not willing to become aggressive and believed that those who did were wrong to do so. Augusteijn states, ‘that one of the main causes for the wide variation in levels of activity and violence was the lack of central control in the initial stages of the conflict.’¹⁴² This meant that the motivation for action was solely in the hands of local leaders, who were able and willing to work independently. Townshend emphasised that the performance of IRA units in 1920-21, depended entirely on the initial impetus in 1918-19 – ‘thereafter no amount of prodding from above could spur on slow starters to make up lost ground.’¹⁴³ This

¹⁴⁰ CI monthly report, Jul 1921.

¹⁴¹ Ibid

¹⁴² Joost Augusteijn, p.342.

¹⁴³ Charles Townshend, ‘The Irish Republican Army and the development of Guerrilla Warfare 1916-21’, *English Historical Review*, xciv (1979), p.322.

however does not hold true for Westmeath, the Volunteer movement was fairly moderate until late 1920, but once the first steps on the road to militancy were taken, a snowball effect occurred. Townshend also holds that Volunteer companies never entirely accepted the control of GHQ,¹⁴⁴ this may be true but here is evidence to suggest that Westmeath companies were directly influenced by GHQ orders. There was a major increase in engagements, following the official sanction of violence from Dublin, also when GHQ ordered the burning of barracks in Easter 1920, it was also immediately acted upon.

Sinn Féin membership boomed during the course of 1917, and the Irish Volunteers grew steadily through 1918. There was a start to open drilling in late 1917, but only in certain areas, and it was these areas that became the centres of radical activity. At first drilling was used as a tool of defiance against the crown forces, but by the end of 1918 it went underground, as the authorities began to arrest the leaders of these drills. Likewise large meetings were unheard of at the end of 1918, whereas they had reached epidemic proportions at the start of the year. They re-emerged at the beginning of 1919, but apart from circulation of seditious literature, evidence of threatening letters, a few cases of malicious damage and four raids for arms there was hardly any Volunteer activity, throughout the year. The only real sign of a militant and aggressive element was the fact that during a number of the large meetings the crowd became unruly and when the police intervened they were attacked. 1920 began with immediate urgency as regards IRA presence, the number of all types of activity surged during the course of the year. Attacks on police barracks became quite common from May and serious ambushes of crown forces became common from July. The authorities did fight back as the number of arrests and imprisonment's increased sharply during the course of the year. By 1921 a series of tit-for-tat measures between both sides are witnessed as the county fell into general lawlessness.

¹⁴⁴ Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848*, (Oxford, 1983), pp.332-333.

CHAPTER II

Analysis of the pattern of the war that developed in Westmeath

Introduction

The Volunteers in 1919 were standing on the brink of a major phenomenon, in two years they would succeed in an aim that had thwarted generations of their countrymen before them – securing the end of British occupation. One would think that to achieve this monumental aim that they had developed a master strategy, that many magnificent military minds had conceived, which was accepted by the masses, who joined together to implement it. The reality was most different, the movement was haphazardly formed with no formulated plan and a hazy aim, it appeared to achieve the support of the masses, but when examined closer the majority of supporters were not entirely committed to military confrontation. Ranks were swelled during the initial period of the movement when the sum of its activities was drilling, but as the War began and it became dangerous to associate with the Volunteers the masses fell away. It was reduced to small cores of individuals who attempted to carry out the task that the public had committed themselves to. It was these men who radicalised their methods from small acts of defiance to major acts of war; Westmeath followed the rest of the nation in this pattern. During the course of this chapter, I will attempt to analyse this process and find out why certain men who developed their outlook from one of boyish mischief, to one of hardened brutality.

Divided attitude

Even at first glance at the occurrences in the county during the war, definitive areas can be witnessed as being the major arenas of confrontation. Certain areas were motivated to take up arms against Crown Forces, whereas other areas were satisfied to idly stand back and do absolutely nothing. For the process of this analysis I will divide the county into two major urban centres – Mullingar and Athlone. For the rural districts I will divide the county into 8 rural centres being – Kilbeggan, Castlepollard, Finea, Kinnegad, Moate, Delvin, Ballymore and Ballinacarrigy. These are areas where

there was some semblance of activity, there were other areas in the county where absolutely nothing occurred but it would be impossible to account for these areas for the sake of comparison due to the lack of source material. I have tried to include all places into one or other of these spheres because chances are that activists would have been recruited and operated in a wide range from their actual base. There were however, some places that I was forced to exclude, as I could not ascertain a sphere for them.

One of the reasons given for inactivity is the presence of a big garrison in a town. The restraint that it gives is two-fold; firstly the chances of being found out and captured are obviously higher and secondly, a garrison was of great financial benefit to a town. The latter was definitely paramount in the minds of the people of Mullingar. The Mullingar Town Commissioners wrote, 'Towards the end of 1916, the people of the town were on the brink of starvation, the working classes having received no increase in wages while the cost of living increased by 50-60%... It is evident that the barracks in Mullingar was a major source of revenue to the town and any time it lay idle, particularly during already harsh times, it was a loss to the town.'¹⁴⁵

In March 1919, the East York's arrived by train to Mullingar, the iconography which greeted them would point to a deep republican feeling in the town, but the reality which faced them was vastly different. As they left the station they were greeted by messages of 'forward the revolution', 'up the rebellion' and 'prepare for the coming struggle', painted on the walls. They discovered however that the town was not full of the 'rabid Sinn Feiners', depicted by the English newspapers, but that they were actually welcomed by the general population.¹⁴⁶ James Hynes who worked as a post office clerk, and was an integral part of the IRA's intelligence in Mullingar pointed out, 'It should be borne in mind that the Mullingar Brigade operated under the noses of a large military garrison and one of the greatest police concentrations in the provinces, whereas county companies carried out their operations with a comparatively remote degree of disturbance, detection or danger.'¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Patricia Gibney, 'The Military in Mullingar', p.26.

¹⁴⁶ *The Snapper*, monthly Journal of the East Yorkshire Regiment, May 1919.

¹⁴⁷ Statement of Volunteer James Hynes, in private hands, submitted to the pensions board in 1958, contained in Patricia Gibney thesis.

But evidence does not concur, there were thirty arrests in the county during 1918, only six of these occurred in the two large towns with garrisons, the rest occurred in rural areas. Albeit eight were agrarian, but fourteen political arrests took place in Kilbeggan, one after a raid for arms and two for possession of arms, the other seven were from a large meeting that was baton-charged by the police, and a further four were arrested for unlawful assembly. In 1919 there were twenty-three arrests in the county, eight of which were in the garrison town of Athlone but there was only one in Mullingar. Four of the arrests in Athlone were the result of agrarian agitation, two for unlawful assembly, one for illegal drilling and one for soliciting a soldier to sell a rifle. There were a further two arrests in Kilbeggan, but there were also six arrests as a result of agrarian agitation in Littleton (in Moate area). In July and August of 1919, there were four mass gatherings, which turned unruly, three were in rural areas and were baton-charged and arrests were made, but the one that took place in Mullingar was not so strictly dealt with. The CI reported the matter as 'a slight disturbance between military and Sinn Féiners in Mullingar...quickly suppressed and steps taken to prevent any repetition of it.'¹⁴⁸ The newspaper reports of the incident were not so dismissive of the matter. According to the *Westmeath Examiner*, there were 200 soldiers and 400 civilians involved. After a time they were separated, but 70 or 80 civilians remained singing rebel songs, the area was just cordoned off and they dispersed at their own free will, some three hours later.¹⁴⁹ Of course it is obvious that with so many involved the soldiers may not have been able to disperse such a mob, as easily as they would a smaller crowd in the rural areas. It is also of interest to note that the same newspaper regarded much of the disturbance as been attributable to strangers who had come into town to attend a Sinn Féin meeting which was been held the next day.

There were a total of 114 arrests in the county in 1920; this figure represents a gigantic increase. There were a seemingly massive amount of arrests in Athlone with a grand total of forty-four, but forty of these were conducted after a raid on arbitration court in Athlone, and all bar one were released the following day. In the other urban centre, Mullingar, there were only nine arrests all year,

¹⁴⁸ CI monthly report, Jul 1919.

yet it was an area of much activity during the year, with a total of thirty-one indictable offences reported to the police. Castlepollard's number of arrests is surprisingly high, as there was very little activity in comparison, with a total of only eleven indictable offences, yet there was twice the amount of people arrested. What is even more interesting is the fact that they were all arrested at the same time. After the kidnapping of two magistrates, fourteen suspects were rounded up, one of whom died in custody.¹⁵⁰ Therefore it would appear that for serious matters, the police applied serious pressure to make sure that such instances would not happen again. There were serious crimes in Athlone and Mullingar that did not excite the same reaction from the police.

There were a total of 126 arrests in 1921. It becomes difficult to create a geographical breakdown of arrests for 1921, as internment without trial had become very common, the newspapers therefore do not carry any trial news and the CI tends to lump the entire amount of people interned into one group and does not differentiate their origins.

It would appear on this evidence that the rural areas were policed more stringently. It is true that police presence in these outlying areas was not what it once was, according to a newspaper report there were formerly three police stations on the road between Mullingar and Kilbeggan; they had all been evacuated.¹⁵¹ There had being a total of thirty-two R.I.C. barracks in Westmeath, but as the chart below shows by the end of the War of Independence this number had being exactly halved to sixteen, thus leaving large areas of the county unpoliced

¹⁴⁹ *Westmeath Examiner*, 19 Jul 1919.

¹⁵⁰ *MRWN*, 4 Nov 1920.

¹⁵¹ *MRWN*, 8 Jan 1920.

TABLE 1.**DATES OF WHEN BARRACKS WERE EVACUATED AND DESTROYED IN
WESTMEATH**

Centre	Station	Evacuated	Destroyed
Mullingar	Ballinea		27.10.20
	Ballinacarrigy (outhouses burned)		
	Crazy Corner	15.11.20	
	Killucan Hut		13.07.20
	Kinnegad (attacked)		
	Rochfortbridge (attacked)		
	Stonyford	15.11.20	
	Milltownpass		
	Mullingar		
Athlone	Athlone		
	Ballinahown Wood		
	Brawney	7.20	31.07.20
	Fardrum	15.11.20	
	Glasson		7.07.20
	Littleton		7.07.20

Castlepollard	Castlepollard (attacked)		
	Clonmellon		
	Collinstown		8.20
	Coole	15.11.20	
	Delvin		27.7.20
	Fore		
	Lisclogher	15.11.20	
	Multyfarnham		
	Rathowen		
Moate	Moate		
	Ballinagore	15.11.20	
	Ballymore		
	Castletown-geoghegan		
	Kilbeggan		
	Mounttemple		8.20
	Moyvore	15.11.20	
	Streamstown		7.7.20

Source: Compiled from CI reports and the newspapers *Westmeath Examiner and MRWN*.

The strength of the R.I.C. force in the county on September 3 1918, was one County Inspector, three District Inspectors, with an effective strength of four Head Constables and 203 of lower ranks. This is equal to thirty-five men to every 10,000 of the population as in 1911. The county was divided into four districts – Mullingar with nine stations, Athlone with six, Castlepollard with nine and Moate

with eight.¹⁵² Strength of R.I.C. stations varied; in Mullingar there was a total of seven sergeants and seventy men (forty of whom were Auxiliaries), Kinnegad had five sergeants and eleven men, Castlepollard had four sergeants and twenty men and Rochfortbridge had four sergeants and twenty-one men.¹⁵³ The return for military in the county on 25 December 1920, was forty-nine officers and 1,147 soldiers. On July 16, 1921 it was fifty-five officers and 1,261 men.¹⁵⁴ They were divided up as follows:

TABLE 2.

MILITARY STRENGTHS IN WESTMEATH ON JULY 16, 1921

Unit	Location	Officers	Rank and File
1 st Battalion Leicestershire Regiment	Athlone	15	614
Detachment of same	Athlone Castle	1	28
1 st Battalion East York's Regiment	Mullingar	16	345
Detachment of same	Kilbeggan	1	30
Detachment of 1 st Royal Dragoons	Athlone	-	3
R.A.S.C.	Athlone	17	197
R.A.S.C.	Mullingar	-	9
R.A.M.C.	Athlone	2	8
R.A.M.C. Detachment of 17 th Company	Mullingar	1	1
R.G. Detachment of 59 th Field Company	Athlone	-	14
R.C. of signals	Athlone	1	6
M.P.	Athlone	-	3
Detachment of 3 rd Tank Battalion	Athlone	1	3
Total		55	1261

Source: Jeudwine papers, file no. 72/82/2.

¹⁵² Thom's Directory, (Dublin, 1919).

¹⁵³ Mulcahy papers, in U.C.D. archives, Chief of Staff of IRA correspondence files, 1921 for Westmeath.

When a closer look is taken at the dates of when barracks were destroyed or evacuated, some interesting results are exposed. In almost every case, the areas where there was still a barrack operating, were the areas that were the most active. By the end of the war in the Mullingar barrack zone; Ballinacarrigy, Kinnegad, Rochfortbridge and Milltownpass were still operating, and in all these areas except the first, there was a lot of activity whereas Ballinea, Crazy Corner, Stoneyford and Killucan were all closed, yet there was no activity in any of these four. The same is true of the Moate area; Moyvore, Ballinagore, Mountemple and Streamstown were closed and there was no activity in any of these areas whereas Moate, Kilbeggan, Ballymore and Castletown-geoghean all operated until the end of the War, yet all except the last were areas of activity. The only exceptions to this pattern were Delvin in the Castlepollard zone and Glasson in the Athlone zone. Perhaps local companies thought that once they had successfully ejected British rule in their local area they had done enough. More likely however was that once their area was clear the brigade focused its energies on other areas. Also in the evacuated areas there was no need to disrupt transport or communication lines, there probably was a prevalence of intimidatory tactics on people who did not accept the new governing body of law and order, but there was no police presence to record any crime.

TABLE 3.**INDICTABLE OFFENCES IN WESTMEATH 1918-1921***

	Road	Malicious	Malicious	Raids for	Raids on	R.I.C	
	Damage*	Damage	Injury	Arms	Mails	Attacks	Total
Athlone	0	20	3	2	11	12	48
Mullingar	12	17	6	8	17	4	64
Kilbeggan	15	14	1	11	12	13	66
Castlepollard	5	7	1	1	12	3	29
Finea	2	5	0	1	4	2	16
Kinnegad	3	3	0	1	2	4	13
Moate	0	7	2	2	2	5	18
Delvin	0	1	0	1	1	2	5
Ballinacarigy	2	2	0	0	2	2	8
Ballymore	1	2	0	0	3	2	8
Other **	1	4	0	3	0	0	38
Total	41	82	13	30	66	49	283

Source: These figures were compiled from a combination of CI reports 1918-1921, and from the newspapers – *Westmeath Examiner* and *Midland Reporter and Westmeath Nationalist*.

(Note: In such counts as indictable offences I am not including in the figures agrarian offences that were strictly agrarian i.e. ones where there is no tincture of IRA influence.)

* This chart purposely omits the indictable offences of possession of arms and seditious literature, and cases of intimidation.

** Road damage is inclusive of trenching roads, cutting telegraph wires and raiding mails.

*** Other represents areas where indictable offences were committed, that could not be categorised inside the spheres of the 10 centres.

It is interesting to chart militant actions of the Volunteers in each of the ten centres. There were no cases of illegal drilling reported by the CI for the urban centres of Mullingar or Athlone during 1918. For the same period however there were fourteen cases in Kilbeggan, ten in Delvin, eight in Castlepollard, three in Ballinacarrigy and two in both Moate and Kinnegad. However during the same period there were seven large meetings in Mullingar. In Kilbeggan there were two large meetings, the first of which was baton-charged, perhaps illustrating that the police in the rural areas were far less tolerant of these mass shows of resistance. It is also of interest that following an attack upon the R.I.C. on 3 August, between Kilbeggan and Rochfortbridge, six young men of the farming class were arrested. The prosecution's evidence depended mainly on the testimony of Constable Phelan, who had been shot during the attack. Phelan identified the defendants and stated that he had known them for about eight years. All of the defendants produced alibis, but they were not other activists or family members.¹⁵⁵ I believe this to be of the utmost importance as it indicates that the IRA had strong support from the local population in Kilbeggan. In other parts of the county people would gather and cheer released prisoners but to lie in court for them is another matter entirely. All the defendants were acquitted. One other a Joseph Daly had his case adjourned, in order that there would be more time for the preparation of his defence. Kilbeggan maintained its position as the most radical area of resistance, throughout the War; there are many reasons for this. The area had a strong tradition of resistance, the only rising in the county in 1916 had occurred in the neighbouring parish of Meedin, and the influence of the Malone's who had led that incident was still prevalent.¹⁵⁶ Also GHQ had sent down an organiser in early 1918; a young, dedicated and charismatic young man named Ernie O'Malley.¹⁵⁷ It is evident that the Kilbeggan battalion heeded orders from GHQ; such as in early 1920, when GHQ authorised raiding houses for arms, there was an immediate reaction in Kilbeggan, there were six raids for arms reported to the CI in the first week of January.¹⁵⁸ They were probably the best equipped to commence military operations. Augusteijn argues that if a locality took the initiative to

¹⁵⁵ *MRWN*, 2 Sept 1920.

¹⁵⁶ C.Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution*, (London, 1971), pp. 53, 83.

¹⁵⁷ CI monthly report, Apr 1918, and Ernie O'Malley, *On Another Man's Wound*, (Dublin, 1979), p.79.

engage in violence, a process was set in motion, in which action and reaction lead to a spiralling severity of conflict.¹⁵⁹ Volunteers in Killbeggan had engaged in early activities such as drilling and raiding for arms, some of them had been arrested and sent to prison. Here they radicalised their views, also the authorities knew who was involved, when crimes were committed, they harassed these mens families further strengthening their resolve. Consequently they were willing to commit serious offences and so a pattern develops. Generally therefore those areas that initially were active, remained at the forefront for the remainder of the conflict.

From Table 3, it can be deduced exactly where various activities were taking place. Killbeggan had a total of thirteen attacks on RIC, Athlone came in second with twelve attacks, but nowhere else was there more than five attacks. Moate had five attacks, but it must be remembered that the attacks in Moate, Athlone and to a certain extent Killbeggan, often involved the same activists. There were twenty cases of malicious damage in Athlone and seventeen in Mullingar during the course of the year, with the slightly less number of fourteen in Killbeggan. This undoubtedly illustrates that the potential for radical acts of violence existed in the urban areas, but they were not so capable or daring to attack the R.I.C. and risk the consequences of such a confrontation. Perhaps the core activists only attacked crown force patrols in open country, where the chances of being captured were very slight. It is definitely the case that the number of indictable offences is in fact greater, as large areas of the county were unpoliced and therefore outrages went unrecorded. It is interesting however to note that in the list of arrests during the Civil War, there were only four listed as coming from Killbeggan.¹⁶⁰ However there were a massive forty from Moate and surrounding areas, surely the area with the most radical activists would have more anti-Treaty or at least would have more belligerent divisions than anywhere else. This reinforces the theory, that many Volunteers may have operated in Killbeggan but were not originally from there, perhaps fighting in Killbeggan because of a weakened police presence or the support of the local community there. It is certain that the South Roscommon and South Westmeath brigades had banded together and formed an ASU, which was responsible for

¹⁵⁸ CI monthly report, Jan 1920.

¹⁵⁹ Augustejjn, p.343.

¹⁶⁰ Figures supplies by Tom Cuffe, gathered from Military Archives.

the Parkwood, and Cornafulla ambushes which took place nearby.¹⁶¹ The majority of men on this column were Moate men. They had an array of ex-British army to train them in the form of James Tormey and George Adamson from Moate and Michael Gaffney and Bill Casey from Ballymore. However it must be stressed how few men actually took part in these ambushes, only four men took part in the Cornafulla ambush.¹⁶² This points to the extent of how peripheral the IRA were in the county.

Garvin states that there is nothing spontaneous about the revolution that it was the combined efforts of two groups of activists over two generations.¹⁶³ This is usually confined to national level but it could hold true for local level as well. Killbeggan and Athlone were the only areas it would seem where there had been a good deal of IRB influence due to the presence of the Malones and visits by their contact Liam Mellows. 'He used to cycle to Athlone, Birr and Tyrellspass where he stayed with the Malones...(in Athlone) he reported to Peadar Melinn...Apart from soldiers the largest part of the population worked in the woollen mills. These were closed for annual holidays.... There were plenty of people with time on their hands and Mellows was able to recruit what proved a very active sluagh.¹⁶⁴

HOW IS ACTIVITY IS MEASURED?

In comparison to more active counties like neighbouring Longford, Westmeath was fairly quiet and is referred to as a 'rest county'. But it depends on how 'activity' is defined. If it is solely enumerated on the basis of casualties inflicted on the Crown Forces, Westmeath can definitely be referred to as 'inactive'. There were three R.I.C., two Black and Tans and one British soldier killed by IRA forces, which in comparison to 'active' counties is a minute number. But if we define 'activity' as disrupting British rule and imposing an alternative ruling body on the people, then Westmeath could be described as being a very active county. An t-Óglach stressed in April 1921, that activities such as

¹⁶¹ Seamus O'Meara, *Capuchin Annual* 1970, pp.548-553.

¹⁶² Liam Cox, p. 186.

¹⁶³ Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutionaries in Ireland*, (Oxford, 1987), p.5.

raiding mails and trenching roads were important and referred to them as the 'small jobs'.¹⁶⁵ In 1921 in Westmeath, there were forty-two raids on mails and seventeen post offices were also raided. There were also thirty cases of roads being trenched and communications being disrupted.¹⁶⁶

There were a total of thirty-seven attacks on Crown Force patrols, ten attacks on evacuated barracks and six on occupied barracks. However these did not return the desired effect of inflicting casualties on the enemy. For many of the earlier attacks this had not been the intention, often they just tied up R.I.C. men and took their weapons. But in late 1920 their intention definitely was to kill but they were not very successful in achieving this aim. In all of the long firefights, they seem to have withdrawn inflicting very little damage. Despite thirty-seven attacks on patrols, they only managed to kill six Crown Force and in the process they lost three Volunteers, yet they had the advantage of surprise and numerical superiority. Obviously their inexperience in battle situation was always going to be a major impediment. An ambush at Streete in July 1921, was botched owing to the premature discharge of a rifle, which enabled the enemy to take cover before the IRA had fully entered the ambush position.¹⁶⁷ Another ambush carried out by the third battalion at Auburn failed when two grenades which were flung into a lorry carrying Black and Tans failed to explode, as a result a Volunteer was killed.¹⁶⁸

The Belfast Boycott was enforced in Westmeath, when it was re-introduced into the country in April 1921. There were five cases of trains being stopped and searched, one shop being cleared of goods and one barge being searched. There was a constant barrage of attacks on property and burning of buildings, with eighty-two cases of malicious damage being reported. Added to actions carried out by the IRA, was the contribution delivered by the general population. There were seventy-three large meetings held in the county where the general population showed their support, maybe not the IRA's methods but certainly for their aims. Also the boycott of the police was strictly adhered to in some

¹⁶⁴ C. Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution*. (London, 1971), p.51-53.

¹⁶⁵ *An t-Óglach*, Apr 1921.

¹⁶⁶ CI Report for Jan-Jul 1921. These figures are not entirely accurate as they are concocted solely from police reports and many incidents were not reported to the police, but they do illustrate a trend.

¹⁶⁷ McEoin papers. Statement of Volunteer Seamus Conway.

¹⁶⁸ Seamus O'Meara, *Capuchin Annual* 1970, p.552.

areas. In his monthly report for August 1920, the CI states, ‘in some areas the police are being boycotted every effort made (sic) to destroy their moral.’¹⁶⁹ Earlier in June, the Board of Guardians ruled that the police were no longer to be treated in Mullingar District Hospital and train drivers refused to transport soldiers.¹⁷⁰ However in October he states that the boycott had begun to slacken.¹⁷¹ But in that same month, court had to be suspended in Mullingar due to lack of jurors. And by November it had come to the attention of the authorities that train drivers refused to drive trains carrying arms or ammunition.¹⁷² However there were only three resignations from the R.I.C. in Westmeath, during the entire war, which would point to the fact, that life was not made too difficult or intimidating for the police. The national average of R.I.C. resignations was ten per cent.¹⁷³

The general public also supported the alternative machinery of government that Sinn Féin had implemented. The first sitting of a Sinn Féin arbitration court in Westmeath was held in Mullingar on the 21 July, Conor A. Maguire described the occasion –

‘The venue was in the county council chambers...All the prominent local solicitors were engaged... We were only just beginning when word was brought that the building was been surrounded by the military... Fully armed and accompanied by armoured cars...Kevin O’Shiel who had been presiding boldly stood up and declared “Gentlemen, we must yield to superior forces. It can now be judged, who wish to maintain Law and Order, and who are the disturbers of the peace”’.

The court was disbanded, later gathered in the Greville Arms hotel, it was decided that the court would go outside areas and deal with the cases locally. For several days Kevin O’Shiel moved about the country and succeeded in disposing of the business without again being interrupted.¹⁷⁴ Almost everybody stopped going to the official courts, preferring to attend the Sinn Féin courts –

¹⁶⁹ CI monthly report, Aug 1920.

¹⁷⁰ *Westmeath Examiner*, 20 Jun 1920.

¹⁷¹ CI monthly report, Oct 1920.

¹⁷² CI monthly report, Nov 1920.

¹⁷³ Peter Hart, *The IRA and its enemies*, (New York, 1998), p.94.

¹⁷⁴ Conor A. Maguire, chapter entitled ‘The Republican Courts’, *Capuchin Annual* 1969, pp.380-381.

'petty session courts are almost nil, Sinn Fein courts deal with numbers of agricultural agitation cases and people appear satisfied with their results.'¹⁷⁵

After the Local Government elections of June 1920, the entire local government of the county was immediately handed over to the control of Dáil Éireann. From this point on, the Council became increasingly radical. An order was passed forbidding the secretary or any officer of the council to pass on any information to the Income Tax Authority, in connection with any business from the council. It was proposed to evict all crown officials from the courthouses in Mullingar, Moate and Athlone. A circular letter from the Local Government Board regarding TB patients was ignored, and it was proposed that the Minister of Health in Dáil Éireann report on the matter. A new flag was procured for the County building. Following these open displays of defiance, they received a letter from the Local Government Board, informing them that there would be no more loans or grants, without definite assurance that they would submit their accounts for audit, and conform to their standard controls. They also received orders, that there would be no further payment from the Local Taxation account unless definite assurance was provided, that the monies would be distributed to the services intended. But the council continued to openly display their rebel sympathies; they adjourned for a week as a mark of respect for the death of Terence Mac Sweeney and again on the death of Kevin Barry. Following this, Crown Forces raided the offices of the council and seized the minute books, account books and letter book; they contained valuable information and a series of raids and arrests ensued.¹⁷⁶

Protestant community

Westmeath had the highest rate of big house burnings in Leinster with a total of six; in fact only two counties had more nationwide, Clare with seven and Cork with a massive twenty-six. It would appear that the six big house burnings can be divided into two categories, between two burned out of fear that the military would occupy them and rest were burned for retaliatory purposes. I believe that they were only targeted because of their vulnerability and because they would act as a deterrent to continued military destruction of private property. I do not think that these attacks were based on any

¹⁷⁵ CI monthly report, Jul 1920.

inherent hatred for the local Protestant community, nobody was ever injured in the course of any of these attacks . There is not much evidence of sectarian bitterness in the county. The hunt was stopped once at Dalystown.¹⁷⁷ and a car that was used to convey people to the golf club in Mullingar was destroyed.¹⁷⁸ There were Protestant homes raided for arms but Catholic homes were also raided. There was an isolated incident of the Protestant Church at Ballymore having its windows smashed.¹⁷⁹ But there certainly is not enough evidence to suggest that there was a reign of terror administered against the Protestant members of the population in Westmeath.

Commentator's attribute various reasons to the fact that some areas became very active, whereas other areas witnessed no militant form of rebellion whatsoever. Rumpf and Fitzpatrick both dismissed the idea that you needed bellicose leaders, they placed more emphasis on the need, for a strong republican community. It was often complained that flat, open terrain inhibited guerrilla warfare. Commanders in Roscommon complained of this, but the most rugged areas were not necessarily the most violent, for example – Donegal, Mayo and Galway. Other explanations put forward include how wealthy a county was, evidence of a tradition of agrarian violence or agitation. Within rural society Rumpf and Garvin have asserted the importance of a strong, rural, middle class, as a primary source of Volunteer leadership. The guerrillas themselves however, frequently declared that it was the poor farmers who made the best republicans. Rumpf , Fitzpatrick and Garvin have all proposed a relationship between the War of Independence and the agrarian outrages of 1879-1882. Also, logically the enthusiasm of an area would heavily depend on the competence of the local authorities in attempting to combat insubordination. Other contributing factors would be the strength of the nationalist cultural bodies. Augusteijn dismisses this viewpoint – “ the language movement and to a lesser extent Sinn Féin and the GAA were important vehicles of organisation and radicalisation, but there was no direct relationship between the local strength of the Irish Ireland movement and

¹⁷⁶ Minute books of the Westmeath County Council 1920, located in Westmeath county library.

¹⁷⁷ *Westmeath Examiner*, 18 Jan 1919.

¹⁷⁸ CI monthly report, Apr 1921.

violent republicanism.”¹⁸⁰ Augusteijn points out that a convincing explanation for the differentiated development of violence in Ireland in the 1916-21 has not yet been provided. I believe that it never will be provided, there cannot exist a formula for the entire country, as every county is different, even more so every area within each county is different.

¹⁷⁹ CI monthly report, Nov 1920.

Chapter III

SOCIAL COMPOSITION OF THE IRA IN WESTMEATH.

NUMBER OF BRANCHES OF ORGANISATIONS IN WESTMEATH, JAN 1917 – JUL 1921										
	Jan 17	Jul 17	Dec 17	Jan 18	Jun 18	Dec 18	Jul 19	Dec 19	Dec 20	Jul 21
Sinn Fein	-	7	24	24	25	27	29	29	30	30
Irish Volunteers	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	10	11	11
National Volunteers	28	28	28	28	28	28	28	18	-	-
Gaelic League	3	3	7	7	7	7	7	6	8	8
G.A.A.	22	25	25	24	27	25	26	25	26	26
United Irish League	27	27	20	20	20	16	16	16	16	-

Source: CI Reports Jan 1917 – Jul 1921. (National Volunteers and United Irish League ceased to exist in the county and there fore their return is denoted as -)

As can be ascertained from the table above the only noticeable increase in the amount of companies was during the conscription crisis of 1918. In this period the membership of the movement increased from 149 in January 1918, to 738 in May 1918. The next marketable jump is in August 1919 when membership increased to 1019, however this number falls to 928 the following month. But these figures are definitely misleading, in the extent of my research a more realistic figure would be less than a hundred men who could be relied on to carry out even minor acts of rebellion. Sinn Féin clubs spread like wildfire during the conscription crisis and remained at a high level then after, but once again the numbers on paper would have far outweighed the number of reliant, loyal, committed members.

¹⁸⁰ Augusteijn, p.42.

I have isolated one hundred activists, in attempt to constrict a social composition of the Volunteer movement in Westmeath. The Volunteers that I have chosen are the ones that cropped up in police reports and newspaper reports. As a result of these sources, the names that I have gathered are likely to be the most active members of the movement. In order to achieve an adequate picture some demographic characteristics of the Volunteers are compared to the community in which they lived in. I was unable to gather enough information on individual companies so the comparison is very widely based on the entire county. Therefore there is no differentiation made between rural and urban members. There was a preliminary list of nearly two hundred but this had to be reduced, as many could not be located in the 1911 census returns. Many activists' occupations were impossible to track down so I will refer to their fathers' occupation as provided for in the 1911 census returns. It also makes no differentiation between the different periods of the war. Also no valuation as to size of farms or other landholdings has been made.

TABLE 4.

OCCUPATIONS OF VOLUNTEERS IN WESTMEATH 1918-21

	Volunteers	Volunteer's fathers
Farmer/son (%)	16.6	32.6
Farm Labourer (%)	27.0	19.3
Un/semi-skilled (%)	4.2	13.5
Skilled (%)	25.0	17.3
Shop asst./clerk (%)	8.3	0
Merchant (%)	8.3	11.5
Professional (%)	6.2	0
Ex-military (%)	12.5	-
Other (%)	-	1.9
Sample	48	52

Source: 1911 Census returns for Westmeath, newspaper reports in *Westmeath Examiner* and the *Midland Reporter and Westmeath Nationalist*. Tom Cuffe supplied valuable addresses for some volunteers.

TABLE 5.

OCCUPATIONS OF THE ENTIRE MALE POPULATION WESTMEATH IN 1911.

	Total	Total as a %
Professional class	2,520	11.7
Domestic class	525	2.4
Commercial class	813	3.8
Agricultural class	12,498	58.2
Industrial class	5,086	23.7
Total	21,442	99.8

Source: 1911 Census for Westmeath.

I have deleted non-productive class to provide a better indication of the occupations of the males who are eligible to work.)

One massive assumption is being drawn i.e. that for some of the names that their fathers ran a business and they did not work in it due to their age (i.e. their age in 1911 when the census was drawn) I have made an assumption that they worked in the family business when they would have come of age in 1918. I have included teachers in the professional section.

As can be seen from the table above, the rebels came from a wide range of backgrounds.

However the core of the Volunteers were drawn from the agricultural sector. As can be seen from the other table this is hardly surprising as a whopping 58% of eligible males worked in the agricultural sector. An important differentiation must be made however between farmers and labourers.

Westmeath differs from the majority of counties because the IRA had far greater appeal to labourers, than farmers in Westmeath. The norm was that labourers were too economically dependent on the

large farms to be involved in the IRA. However of 43.6% of Volunteers coming from an agricultural background, 27% were farm labourers.

The commercial class make up only a minute 3.8% of working males, but yet they make up over 16% of the IRA, when you combine the sections of merchants and shop assistants. Contrasting starkly to the evidence in other counties, is the amount of merchants who became Volunteers, who owned their own business – a total of 40%, all the rest worked in the family business. This runs contrary to the general tag that is normally applied to the movement, that of people with very little stake in the country, and therefore willing to attempt to transform the reigns of power, to improve their position and social standing. It is important to note that of the number of professionals I found, three quarters of them were Irish teachers, so perhaps this figure of 6.2% is misleading. Similarly a lot of the percentage of skilled workers were apprentices or in fact it is their fathers occupation. The movement did not attract people from the two extremes of the social scale, there was only one example from the upper class that of a doctor. There was also one of these boundaries at the lower end of the scale. I only stumbled across one name whose parents were idle. Those described as unskilled, held jobs in factories, on the railway, as carters or as drivers. The 1.9% described as other refers to just one Volunteer's father who was unusually an R.I.C. sergeant.

Another huge influential pull on people to join was family ties and a long tradition of republicanism in the family. From these one hundred activists, there are five sets of two brothers and two sets of three brothers. However in only one case was their father also actively involved, highlighting the fact that the movement really only appealed to the younger bracket. Many fathers may have believed in the republican ideal that their sons were striving for, but disapproved of their methods.

AGE

Table 6

AGES OF THE VOLUNTEERS IN WESTMEATH IN 1918

<15	15-20	21-26	27-32	33-38	39-44	45+	Sample
3	17	21	4	1	2	2	50
6	34	42	8	2	4	4	(as a %)

Source: 1911 Census returns for Westmeath.

Of the 50 sampled a massive 38 were between the ages of 15 and 26. Many commentators of this period attribute much of this youthful restfulness with the ban on emigration imposed on the country in 1914. The more adventurous or daring, who would usually have emigrated, began seeking alternative ways to express their defiance or frustration. However it is true to say that there was an outlet in the shape of the British army, which recruited well in Westmeath.

There definitely did exist a generational gap, which flung the young Volunteers even closer together, creating a greater bond and cementing the fact that they were rebelling against more than just the Crown Forces. The place of young men in early twentieth century Ireland was one of strict subordination to their fathers and employers. The sons of farmers and merchants usually worked for no pay and owned no property. It was realistically the case of waiting for ones parents to die, to gain an income and get married, because of this Volunteers could be deemed 'boys' well into their late twenties or even early thirties.¹⁸¹ Ernie O'Malley who trained Volunteers in Kilbeggan described rural families he encountered (not specifically in Kilbeggan) –

'Home life was terribly strict. The men worked like mules and the women like slaves. The boy got the odd sixpence or shilling the day he went to market...At the beginning great courage was needed to enable a man to leave home for some hours in the busy season, to leave for a day was wonderful and,

¹⁸¹ Peter Hart, p.173.

at any time one chose, nothing short of marvellous. I think great credit should be given to the young lads who risked parental displeasure and loss of inheritance by leaving home despite their parents.”¹⁸² Shop assistants, apprentices for trades and farm labourers also all worked in similar situations with no or very low money.¹⁸³ Added to these slavish conditions, their low-class status was further stressed by the fact that until 1918 these young men of no property were not allowed vote. It is no wonder therefore that they grabbed the opportunities that the Volunteer movement would have offered them. The movement would have provided them with something to do as well as entrusting power to them. The presence of these ‘leather-gaitered, trench-coated, rifle and bandolier slung figures of the flying columns’¹⁸⁴ must have attracted the awe of the public and the amorous glances of young women. It is a romantic way of looking at the organisation, but there must have existed some element of what David Fitzpatrick referred to as ‘thousands who saved hay in the sunlight, sought to save Ireland by moonlight’¹⁸⁵

I found with the men I sampled, it definitely was not the case that the Volunteer in the family was the eldest brother, it was always very mixed even in cases where the eldest brother was in the ideal candidature bracket of early twenties. It is assumed that they feared joining because they had more to lose in the shape of their inheritance than their younger brothers. This would tie in with the fact that in Westmeath the movement was not community based. Perhaps it was always left to the rebel in a family, or through pure supposition the leaders may have emerged as the ones with the best oral, organisational or physical ability. Nevertheless there definitely existed a society which bonded these young men together and sowed the seeds of rebellion in their midst. Appeal of the movement was definitely concentrated in those between fifteen and twenty-six. Some counties like Mayo or Tipperary appealed across a wide range of ages depicting that the community there accepted the movement, whereas in Westmeath it was definitely more marginalised, serving a peripheral role.¹⁸⁶ Hart describes why certain men volunteered –

¹⁸² ‘Ernie O’Malley, ‘Autobiographical Letter’, p.9.

¹⁸³ Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968)

¹⁸⁴ Augusteijn p. 134.

‘The decision to join was a collective rather than an individual one, rooted more in local communities and networks than in ideology or formal political loyalties. Young men tended to join the organisation together with, or following, families and membership groups.’¹⁸⁷

In Mullingar, I unearthed sixteen Volunteers; six were from Patrick St., two of these were carpenters, one had a father who was a carpenter and two were brothers. In Kilbeggan there were the three Malone brothers, the three McGuinness brothers and their father. A natural leader, whom others simply followed, usually formed companies on local initiative. Ideal candidates were those who had just returned from serving with the British Army such as Tormey and Adamson in Athlone or Michael Gaffney and Bill Casey in Ballymore. They would have recruited their friends and neighbours and so formed a company. Others who were assured officer status were ex-prisoners, those who were interned in Frongoch, like Malone and Melinn from Meedin or Hurley in Athlone.¹⁸⁸

We can witness a general progression in the case of a few selected Volunteers. For example, John Hurley from Athlone was imprisoned in Frongoch in 1916.¹⁸⁹ It was here that his views became more radical, as he came into contact with like-minded people. He was released on Thursday, 3 August 1916¹⁹⁰ and it is he who we see at the forefront of activity in Athlone in 1917. In an R.I.C. report dated 27 November 1917, detailing a procession in memory of the Manchester Martyrs in Athlone we read ‘John Hurley, Main St., Athlone, Captain of the Irish Volunteers was in charge and wore Irish Volunteers uniform...gave a short address off the parapet of the dispensary.’¹⁹¹ In a CI report of May 1918, ‘John Hurley, a prominent Sinn Feiner was arrested.’¹⁹² In a raid on an arbitration court in Athlone on the 23rd September 1920, were there were 40 arrests, all were released the following day, except a John O’Hurley, then a county councilor.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁵ Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish life 1913-21*, (David Fitzpatrick, 1977), p.138.

¹⁸⁶ Augusteijn p.354-357

¹⁸⁷ Hart, p.208

¹⁸⁸ Sean O’Mahony, *Frongoch*, (Dublin, 1987), pp. 143-144, 212.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid

¹⁹⁰ Art O’Brein papers, (NLI, MS 84435)

¹⁹¹ R.I.C. report for illegal activities in 1917.

¹⁹² CI monthly report, May 1918.

Social strata within the Volunteers

George Adamson and his brother Joseph were the sons of a shoemaker, both had joined the British Army; through his experience in the Dardanelles, George became a Brigadier General in the Volunteers.¹⁹⁴ Yet for a long period of the war, he was subordinate to Seamus O'Meara who was O/C of the Athlone brigade, but had no previous military experience. Joseph had fought in the 1916 Rising in Cork with "B" Coy., Cork Brigade, yet he served under Thomas Moore in "B" Coy, 2nd Batt., Athlone Brigade, who was a printing contractor with no military experience.¹⁹⁵ J.J. Meehan was a member of "E" Coy, 1st Batt.¹⁹⁶ Longford Brigade which operated out of Finea and Streete in Co. Westmeath, he was farmers son.¹⁹⁷ He became O/C of the Inny brigade during the Civil War, illustrating that it was possible for those who were good soldiers to work their way through the ranks.¹⁹⁸ Dick Bertles was a carpenter as was father, he become O/C of "B" Company, 2nd Battalion, Athlone Brigade, Michael Jordan is listed as having being a small farmer from Ballinacarrigy, yet he became O/C of the Inny Brigade, Michael McCoy was O/C of Mullingar, he was a carpenter and his father was a herdsman. All these examples further reinforce the theory that the movement had egalitarian leanings, that a discriminated group in society were bonding together and fighting as much for equality within their local communities as they were for Ireland's independence.

There is however some evidence to suggest that upper middle class people who joined the movement were more assured of obtaining the leadership of the political side of the movement. Patrick Brett owned an influential business in Mullingar and he became President of Sinn Féin in Westmeath. Kennedy in Castlepollard ran the town's hotel and it was he who led the drillings of young men in Castlepollard and also organised Sinn Fein.

¹⁹³ CI monthly report, Sept 1920.

¹⁹⁴ Padraic O'Farrell *Who's who in the Irish War of Independence*.

¹⁹⁵ McEoin papers, MS 1556.

¹⁹⁶ McEoin papers, MS 1686.

¹⁹⁷ 1911 Census Returns.

HOW DID THE WESTMEATH VOLUNTEERS COMPARE WITH THOSE OF THE REST OF IRELAND?

All the counties differed widely with respect to the way their populations conducted themselves during the war. Augusteijn attributes this to the lack of central co-ordination in the initial phases of the conflict; this led to the impetus depending on local activists.¹⁹⁹ In many ways, I believe that Westmeath followed the same pattern as the active counties in the south but perhaps eighteen months later. There is no doubt that once violence was engaged in, it set off a spiralling effect and the county became increasingly active. The war only really began in Westmeath in June 1920, and from that point on it remained active. Perhaps if the war had continued longer it would have become a principle area of agitation.

Peter Hart in his study of Cork concludes that the Volunteers were primarily urban, with a large proportion of its members being comprised of skilled and white-collar workers especially as officers. In Augusteijn's study of the counties of Dublin, Derry, Mayo and Tipperary he claims that the IRA drew on a wide range of society but not from the highest or lowest levels, he also argues that the active members were predominantly urban. He does however argue that farmers constituted the main body of the volunteers in the rural areas. Westmeath follows this trend in the rural areas, although there were many Volunteers from the commercial class in the movement, in the urban areas.

Conclusion

So in conclusion then, the Volunteers achieved their desired goal in twenty-six counties, but they failed to succeed in gaining independence in all thirty-two, they had compromised themselves, to what extent is the subject of eternal debate. This compromise resulted in a bloody Civil War that destroyed the movement. There is a massive poignancy in this, these young men had achieved so much in such a short space of time, perhaps because they gained so much so soon, it resulted in a fickle attitude, that they did not realise to what a degree they had succeeded. Undoubtedly it was a national effort, it is correct to revere the

¹⁹⁸ McEoin papers, MS 1686.

active counties of Cork, Clare, Tipperary and Longford, but I do not think that if these areas were the only places that were causing problems, the British administration would have found the necessity of offering a truce. The fact that the whole country was creating alternative systems of government, law and policing; as well as carrying out a constant barrage of ambushes and attacks on Crown Force patrols and barracks; is a more convincing reason as to why. But inactivity did exist. Are there reasons for explaining this inactivity? Westmeath had started late; the IRA in the county only really began in earnest as late as August 1920 and therefore was a few paces behind the more 'active' counties. The reasons for starting later? Impossible to pinpoint an exact reason, many analysts have attributed the reason as being down to a social aspect, that there were certain areas that had a prevalence of suitable candidates who would be willing to commit radical acts of defiance, but I think that this could be an example of being too analytical, every county if analysed deeply would have every type of social class, including those who were most likely to become radical. I believe the most likely reason is almost coincidental; areas that were premature in resorting to violence became more radical as their Volunteers became hardened veterans with extensive military expertise, who were able to inflict more damage when they attacked the Crown Forces. Therefore there is a great probability that activity was based to a large extent on the initiative of local leaders. However both Rumpf and Fitzpatrick dismissed that success in the movement was based to a large extent upon the presence of inspirational, motivational, bellicose leaders; they both place more emphasis on followers. Also it was often complained that flat open terrain (of which Westmeath is largely composed of) was unsuitable for guerrilla warfare, commanders in Roscommon complained of this; but the most rugged areas of Ireland were not necessarily the most violent, for example counties like - Donegal, Mayo and Galway. Other factors that various commentators have stressed as being paramount to activity include how wealthy a county is, how rural a county is and the existence of a tradition of agrarian violence. Fitzpatrick has argued that Irish nationalism was above all a rural preoccupation, that its most violent

manifestations were concentrated in the countryside. Within rural society, Rumpf and Garvin have asserted the importance of a strong, rural, middle class as a primary source of Volunteer leadership. The guerrillas themselves however have frequently declared that it was the poor farmers who made the best rebels. Rumpf, Fitzpatrick and Garvin have all proposed a relationship between the guerrilla war and the geography of agrarian outrages of 1879-1882.

In the course of my research I found that commentators' views were constantly opposing and contradicting one another. Undoubtedly factors can be isolated as to describe the patterns that various areas followed but I believe that none can be regarded as being an absolute reason as to why certain areas developed along specific lines. I view it has being more the case of a conglomeration of reasons, reacting and acting off one another, creating a certain attitude towards the War.

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July 2001.

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