

## INTRODUCTION

### OLD ATHLONE SOCIETY 2015 JOURNAL

I am honoured by the invitation from Old Athlone Society to pen this introduction for what, by any standard, is a very significant contribution to our understanding of the Civil War and its place in our history – both local and nationally.

In what is generally termed a “*Decade of Centenaries*”, the events of 1913 – 1923 have given rise to a veritable tidal wave of public discussion, broadcast programmes, newspaper articles and supplements, exhibitions and lectures, and, not least, to a veritable deluge of newly published books concerning that turbulent decade.

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that the preceding 15 years of Irish history from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to 1912 received far less retrospective attention in our media and from publishing houses.

The period between Parnell and the emergence of the Ulster Volunteers and the Irish Volunteers deserves, in my view, the same amount of scrutiny as the “*Decade of Centenaries*”. In so many ways, the events between 1913 and 1923 can only really be understood in the context of the “*national revival*” which preceded them. We need, more than ever, academic research into the various strands of that national revival – linguistic, cultural, historiographical, sociological, economic and political.

The obvious fact that the Land War and its outcome stimulated rather than appeased the demands of the national 1<sup>st</sup> Irish, and weakened rather than strengthened the Union, is not merely an irony to be marvelled at; it is a phenomenon to be examined and explained.

The Old Athlone Society, through its conferences, its publications and its activities on the ground, never ceases to command the admiration of so many who behold the fruits of its labours.

There are many estimable local history societies in Ireland but there are few which equal the achievements of the Old Athlone Society. The vision of the Society is finely balanced between attention to the local and a perspective on the national and international, and it is that balance which accounts for the quality of the Society’s activities.

Between the covers of this volume, lies a treasury of research, analysis, argument and opinion.

Coming, as I do, from a family which was riven by the events of 1916, the War of Independence, and the Civil War, I have to confess an almost addictive fascination with those events and with the moral and historical ambiguities and complexities that characterise them.

This fascination is easily understood when I recall that my three sons number among their eight great grandparents a man whose home was destroyed as a reprisal by crime forces in County Kerry in 1920 (Senator Joseph Brennan), an IRA man from County Monaghan who was imprisoned by the British Government and by the Free State Government, elected on a number of occasions to Dáil Éireann (Prof Patrick McCarvill TD) , his fiancée who was Michael Collins' secretary when he was on the run and who took the Anti Treaty side landing herself in prison and joining him on hunger strike (Dr. Eileen McGrane), a founder member of the Gaelic League and first President of the Irish Volunteers who countermanded the 1916 Rising, headed the poll at the Sinn Féin convention in 1917, became a Minister in the first Dáil and speaker of Dáil Éireann during the Treaty debates (Eoin MacNeill), whose home was used as the dump for the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion South Dublin IRA by his sons, two of whom joined the Free State forces and the other who was apparently murdered by Free State forces in Sligo in 1922, and his spouse who was a founder member of Cumann na mBan (Agnes MacNeill).

Indeed, the only “*non-belligerent*” couple were my McDowell grandparents and even they were hugely committed to, and active in, the Redmondite cause.

For these reasons, among others, the articles in this volume are a feast to me.

John Regan's fascinating re-examination of the destruction of the Public Record Office on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 1922 challenges the reliability of the claim that the irreplaceable archive of Ireland's written history was deliberately destroyed by the Republicans occupying the Four Courts. He raises the very serious possibility that the destruction of the Public Record Office became the subject of dishonest propaganda.

It is impossible to conclude with certainty whether the mines in the Public Record Office were detonated by the deliberate actions of the garrison as they evacuated it or whether they were detonated by incoming Free State artillery fire. There is, however, in the military archives at Cathal Brugha Barracks a written instruction from Oscar Traynor to the Four Courts garrison to detonate the mines that they had laid (which doesn't feature in John Regan's analysis of the issue). Whether it throws light on the exact cause of the destruction of the Public Record Office or not, it certainly is relevant to the issue of “*mens rea*” in relation to the destruction of the Four Courts complex.

Moreover, among Eoin MacNeill's papers is to be found the draft of a letter to Séamus O'Donabháin in January 1923, written approximately four weeks after the execution of Rory O'Connor as a reprisal, in which MacNeill refers to O'Connor as “*the Vandal*”.

In short, the value of John Regan's article is, perhaps, not that it draws a firm conclusion on the matter but, on the contrary, that it warns us against doing so.

Gavin Foster, for his part, explores “*The durability of Civil War memory and remembrance, as well as .... the animosities, spirit of defiance and even obsessiveness that animated them*”.

The Civil War is one of those historic events which, at one level, could not be forgotten but at another level almost required to be forgotten.

I was shown, at the Army archives in Cathal Brugha Barracks, an order signed by Desmond Fitzgerald on the date of the handover of Government in 1932 directing every department, post and section of the Defence Forces to destroy by fire that day all records relating to the Civil War executions. Was that an act of statesmanship or cowardice? Or was it a pragmatic attempt to ensure that the Civil War was “*put behind*” the Irish people now that Eamon de Valera’s Fianna Fail were to form the new government?

That memorandum, its motivation, and its effects would, I think, provide the subject matter of considerable and fruitful research as part of this Decade of Centenaries.

Those who have read Patrick Murray’s “*Oracles of God*”, his masterly account of the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland and the struggle for Irish independence, will relish his paper on the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the events of the Irish Civil War. It is only now and in the context of an implosion of the political power and standing of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland that this generation enjoys sufficient perspective to draw conclusions and make judgments about its interventions in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish history and, in particular, in relation to the Civil War.

The generally pro-Treaty stance of the Irish Roman Catholic hierarchy and clergy must also be viewed in the context of the innate hostility of the entire Roman Catholic Church to republicanism as a doctrine, especially in the context of the republican anti-clericalism of the French Republic in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the fraught relations between Italian nationalism and the papacy.

Ian Kennelly, in his article of “*two parts*” looks at the relationship between the media and the events of the Civil War period by focusing on the shooting of Brigadier General George Adamson in Athlone and on the shooting of a Republican prisoner, Patrick Mulrennan, in Custom Barracks.

I must confess a particular personal interest in the Mulrennan shooting as the perpetrator, Commandant General Tony Lawlor, who was Seán McEoin’s second in command, was one of those in charge of the operations in Sligo in which my uncle, Briain MacNeill, was executed.

Lawlor was on friendly terms with the MacNeill family, but when interviewed on the matter by Calton Younger for his history of the Irish Civil War, clearly avoided dealing with the circumstances of Briain MacNeill’s death, telling Younger that no one knew what happened in the incident in which MacNeill and five others lost their lives. As Kennelly points out, the killing of Mulrennan was “*one such infraction of the rules of war in which the perpetrator went unpunished*”.

In the Army archives at Cathal Brugha Barracks, there are indications that a court martial was convened to try Tony Lawlor for some unknown offence but it would appear that, for whatever reason, the court martial never proceeded.

Dr. John Burke, the author of *“Athlone 1900 to 1923: Politics, Revolution and Civil War”* has contributed an article on electoral politics after the revolution and has examined voting patterns and electoral outcomes in midlands constituencies with a view to forming some judgment as to where the centre of gravity of public opinion lay during the Civil War period.

The use of electoral outcomes to study underlying popular attitudes has, of course, some limitations. In multi-seat PR, the *“personality”* factor is significant. Likewise, the influence of the electoral pact between pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty Sinn Féin members clouds the issue. Nonetheless, Dr. Burke’s research casts a new light based on real data on the issue of the underlying sentiment of Irish voters in the midlands at this critical time.

Ann Matthews paints a fascinating picture of the experience and activities of interned women in the Civil War period. As my wife’s grandmother was one of the interned women hunger strikers, Ann’s article has a special interest for me.

Seosaimhí Ní Mhuirí’s recording of the reminiscences of Teresa O’Connell (sister of the late Kathleen O’Connell, personal secretary to Eamon de Valera) is hugely valuable. It throws light on events which were personally experienced by women participants in the War of Independence and in the Civil War. In conversation recorded on the two letters appended to the notes of the conversation demonstrate the real feelings of the participants in those events in a vivid and compelling way.

Likewise, Pat McCarthy, in his article, addresses a number of questions:

- Was a Civil War inevitable?
- When did the Civil War begin?
- Was a Free State victory inevitable?
- When did the Civil War end?
- How many people died in the Civil War?

In raising these questions as items for the historiographical agenda, Pat sketches out a very considerable set of areas for future research.

To those who attended the Old Athlone Society's conference from which these articles are derived, this Volume will bring happy memories; to the rest, they will bring new and refreshing stimulation. For all, they will be a rewarding read.