

A NATION
AND NOT A
RABBLE

THE IRISH REVOLUTION 1913-1923

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- ONE -

OPENING THE WITNESS ACCOUNTS

On the evening of 11 March 2003, state cars began to arrive at the Cathal Brugha military barracks in Dublin, home of the Irish Military Archives. The Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern and the Minister for Defence, Michael Smith were in attendance, as was the former Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave. His father, William T. Cosgrave, was one of the Sinn Féin ministers during the Irish War of Independence and went on to become president of the Executive Council (prime minister) of the new Free State in 1922. Gathered there also was a group of Irish historians, some of whom had been waiting for this occasion for many years. An archive was about to be opened, after a half-century under lock and key, that would shed light on a period still much disputed in Irish history, the revolutionary period of 1913–23.

The historians who were present that day represented two different generations; those who had come to prominence from the late 1960s to the 1980s during the most intense periods of the Troubles of Northern Ireland that began in 1969, and a younger generation who began studying history at university in the late 1980s and early 1990s and had established themselves as professional historians during the peace process that brought the Troubles to an end in the late 1990s. The politicians who attended included those politically active in the 1960s and 1970s as the offspring of the revolutionary generation, and their successors who governed in the 1980s and beyond, while the ghosts of those who fought in the War of

Independence and the civil war loomed large; the barracks itself is named after Sinn Féin's Minister for Defence during the War of Independence.

The archive unveiled and formally launched that day was that of the Bureau of Military History (BMH), which included over 1,700 statements taken from 1916 Rising and War of Independence veterans in the 1940s and 1950s, whose witness accounts of their role in the conflict were impounded in the late 1950s, with no agreement as to when they might be opened, but with a consensus that it would not be for at least another generation. That was hardly surprising; many of the events, individuals and legacies of the revolutionary era were still raw and divisive in mid-twentieth-century Ireland, and there was concern about allegations and accusations that might be contained in the statements with no right of redress. Those involved in collecting the statements, however, had been adamant about their neutrality, and had held firm to their independence; when the old IRA organisation in Limerick city insisted that all potential statements for the BMH had to be submitted to it before being given to J. J. Daly, the Bureau's investigator for Limerick, for example, Daly refused to accept this and the delays caused by his refusal 'were surely worthwhile'.¹

While there was much agreement in 2003 as to the potential value of the BMH statements for professional historians and those interested in history generally, a committee of historians and experts that had been asked to advise the government on the BMH process in the 1940s was not united in its attitude to the value of the collection, when it might be released and the probable verdict of posterity. Richard Hayes, chairman of the Bureau's advisory committee, and director of the National Library of Ireland, wrote to fellow committee member Robert Dudley Edwards, Professor of Modern Irish History at UCD, in February 1958, in relation to disagreement as to when the material should be opened to researchers: 'I think we can do nothing and I have no time to bang my head against a blank wall. Incidentally, the material collected seems to me to be of so little value that I do not mourn the loss.'²

Florence O'Donoghue, another committee member and a War of Independence veteran and keen historian, was adamant that there was no justification for impounding original documents 'which would be available if they had not been given to the Bureau. I put in a number of original documents, some my own, some I had got from friends. I would never have done so if I knew they were going to be inaccessible for a very long period.' In the 1940s and 1950s part of the government's mission

in relation to the BMH, it appeared, was 'to keep the documents out of the historians' hands'; they were there to advise, not supervise.³ Dudley Edwards scribbled a note after a meeting with another of the members of the advisory committee, Sheila Kennedy, a lecturer in history in Galway, to the effect that 'she is fed up with the Bureau, feels it is a dreadful waste of money which could be put to much better historical uses' and that the work 'could well have been done in a university'. This reflected resentment that the work was being carried out by people who were not professional historians, but public servants employed by the Department of Defence.⁴ Furthermore, Hayes had severe doubts about the statements being made available to the general public: 'If every Seán and Seamus from Ballythis and Ballythat who took major or minor or no part at all in the national movement from 1916 to 1921 has free access to the material it may result in local civil warfare in every second town and village in the country.'⁵

Five decades later, this assertion by Hayes might be seen as delightful exaggeration underpinned by a good deal of snobbery. It was an interesting stance, not just in relation to the sensitivities and divisions of the era, but also on the question of to whom the story of the revolution belonged and who should be in a position to research and document it. One of the most notable developments in recent years in Ireland in relation to the history of this period and access to its documentation has been its democratisation, including the opening up of archival material, a lot of it online, to much bigger audiences than was previously the case. It is no longer the preserve of state or an academic elite; much of it is now open to anyone with an Internet connection.

What have such developments meant in relation to an understanding of the revolutionary period? In some respects it was about building on the information contained in valuable collections of source material that had been available for decades. Before the opening of the BMH, historians had access to accounts of life in IRA flying columns and the day-to-day activities and operations of the republican movement during the period 1913–21. The huge archive of Richard Mulcahy, for example, who was chief of staff of the IRA during the War of Independence and whose papers were deposited in the UCD archives in the 1970s, shed much light on the internal dynamics and difficulties of the republican movement. After retiring from politics in 1961 Mulcahy spent much of that decade collating his papers and complementing them with voice recordings of contemporaries, and 'his pioneering decision, under the terms of the Mulcahy Trust

established in December 1970, to make permanent arrangements for depositing his papers in the archives department of UCD, made him an exemplar for other leading politicians from both sides of the treaty divide.⁶

Likewise, Ernie O'Malley, a leading figure in the IRA who had the distinction of writing the best literary accounts of the revolution, had earlier amassed more than 450 handwritten interviews of veterans of the War of Independence and civil war. A native of Castlebar in County Mayo born into comfortable middle-class circumstances, O'Malley was active as an IRA organiser and was appointed commander of the IRA's 2nd Southern Division in 1921. He opposed the Treaty and played a leading role in the anti-Treaty IRA campaign. He conducted the interviews himself; for six years he 'criss-crossed Ireland in his old Ford, driving up boreens and searching out old companions in order to record, and in a sense relive, the glory days of the revolution'. What had begun in the late 1930s 'as an effort to supplement his own knowledge had developed by 1948 into a full-blown enterprise to record the voices, mostly republican, of the survivors of the 1916–23 struggle for independence', with his material eventually deposited in UCD.⁷ O'Malley was therefore conducting his own oral history in tandem with the state's BMH project, but the BMH project was larger and broader in relation to the number and mix of witnesses and the statements were recorded in typescript, unlike O'Malley's, whose handwritten accounts of interviews created significant obstacles for historians because his writing was so difficult to decipher.

After the opening of the BMH in 2003, those seeking to reconstruct events in a particular part of the country now had new opportunities to consult a concentrated body of statements from that region and weigh them alongside information already in the public domain. The mass of statements also enabled historians to reconsider an issue that had not been in any sense settled – the degree to which IRA activities were subject to centralised control. The statements also invited reassessment of such themes as the organisation of the Easter Rising of 1916, the role of women in the conflict, the impact of the First World War and the conscription crisis of 1918, as well as the influence of cultural organisations in the opening years of the century. Many of the contributors placed their statements in the wider context of the social, economic and cultural upheavals of these years.

The BMH statements suggest the resourcefulness and commitment of this generation were exceptional. Theirs was overwhelmingly a revolution

of the young; they were physically fit (they thought nothing of cycling from county to county) and, in the main, politically disciplined. Those looking for evidence of intense ideological debate may be disappointed, but the Bureau files contain much material of interest to the social historian. For Elizabeth Bloxham, flirting and youthful exuberance were part of her membership in Cumann na mBan (CnB) the female auxiliary of the IRA established in 1914, but her statement, like many others, also underlined the seriousness of their mission: 'I have sometimes wondered if an invisible onlooker could have realised underneath our gaiety we were all in such deadly earnest.' Bridget O'Mullane, organising branches of CnB, recalled that

the life was strenuous, as I generally worked in three meetings a day to cover the various activities of each branch. My meals were, of course, very irregular, and the result of this sort of life, which I led for three years ... was that my weight was reduced to 6 stone. I got many severe wettings and consequent colds, which I was unable to attend to. The reaction to this came during the truce [July 1921] when I broke down and had to get medical attention.⁸

Just over ten years after the opening of the BMH archive, a more significant, indeed monumental, archive was in the process of being gradually released to the public; the Military Service Pensions Collection (MSPC), a voluminous collection of nearly 300,000 files relating to the processes involved in the award of pensions for military service during the 1916 Rising, War of Independence and civil war period and for compensating those who suffered loss and injury. Launched by the Taoiseach Enda Kenny in January 2014 as part of a phased programme of the online release of the documents, this archive opens many other doors to an understanding of the role of the ordinary Volunteer from 1916–23 as pension applicants, under a string of legislation from the 1920s to the 1950s, had to provide detailed accounts of their activities to make a case as to why they were deserving of a pension. Their accounts needed to be verified by referees and the administrative process involved the creation of an enormous body of supporting documentation.⁹

What was apparent during the administrative process from the 1920s onwards was that the bar would be set very high in relation to qualifying for a pension; in the words of William T. Cosgrave in 1924, the definition

of active service made it clear the government 'does not intend there should be any soft pensions'.¹⁰ This was, and remained, the case. The archive is, as a result, also a chronicle of great disappointment; the vast majority of those who applied for these pensions were not awarded them. A government memorandum from May 1957 revealed that 82,000 people applied for pensions under the main Pensions Acts of 1924 and 1934; of these, 15,700 were successful and 66,300 were rejected.¹¹ The archive contains an extraordinary level of testimony and detail about individual and collective republican military endeavour, but it is also an archive that reveals much about frustrated expectations, concern about status and reputation and difficulties of verification; it does much to illuminate aspects of the afterlife of the revolution.

While the list of those awarded military service pensions at the highest grade under the 1924 and 1934 Acts reads like a roll call of some of the best known gunmen and later politicians of that era, the bulk of the MSPC archive is filled with the accounts of those who were not household names, and includes many voices of desperation and urgent pleas for pensions due to the abject circumstances of a host of War of Independence and civil war veterans.¹²

Close association with the Irish revolution and its architects was no guarantee of a comfortable life. In July 1941, Nora Connolly O'Brien, a daughter of the labour leader James Connolly, executed after the 1916 Rising, and who herself had been an active member of CnB, wrote to a confidant that she had not

heard a word yet from the Pensions Board, so don't know what is going to happen in my case ... I am at my wits end. We are absolutely on the racks. This week will see the end of us unless I have something definite to count upon. Seamus [her husband] has had no luck in finding any kind of a job. I was hoping that the pension business could be hurried up and what I could get might tide us over this bad spell. There seems no prospect of anything here so we have written to England applying for jobs. I'm absolutely blue, despondent, down and out, hopeless and at the end of my tether ...¹³

In contrast, Tom Barry, one of the best known and most admired of the flying column leaders during the War of Independence, as a result of the Kilmichael ambush of 28 November 1920, when he led an attack

on a patrol of Auxiliaries, seventeen of whom were killed, was primarily concerned about status and reputation rather than material survival in relation to his pension. In January 1940 he received his military service pension award of Rank B rather than Rank A, which 'I reject ... on the grounds of both length of service and of rank'. He was livid that the Board had disallowed him full-time active service on certain key dates: 'It is sufficient to state that my award was humiliating to a degree ... I do ask the Board now to understand that I am feeling ashamed and ridiculous at the award and that I am entitled at least to have this humiliation removed from me.' He insisted on his appeal being heard in person and maintained that he had many former IRA officers who were prepared to verbally testify on his behalf. He successfully appealed his decision and was awarded Rank A.¹⁴ The multitude of narratives in the MSPC archive contain a variety of sentiments and tones; pride, arrogance, anger, self-belief, righteousness and, more often than not, dignity (see Part III). These were also sentiments that strongly influenced written accounts of the revolution in its aftermath.