

BELFAST AND THE RISING



Jimmy McDermot

POBLACHT NA H EIREANN.
THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT
OF THE
IRISH REPUBLIC
TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND.

IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN : In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty; six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

Signed on Behalf of the Provisional Government,

THOMAS J. CLARKE,

SEAN Mac DIARMADA, THOMAS MacDONAGH,

P. H. PEARSE, EAMONN CEANNT,

JAMES CONNOLLY. JOSEPH PLUNKETT.

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2016 marked the one hundredth anniversary of the Easter Rising in Dublin. Historians are in broad agreement that this Rising marked a sea change in Irish Politics. Its military success was significant. It held key areas in Ireland's capital for five days. It involved around 1500 insurgents against the military might of the British Empire and it set in train a series of events which led to the successful Sinn Féin election of 1918, the guerrilla war of 1919-22 and the eventual setting up of a state in the 26 counties which had limited self-government.

However, the Easter Rising for the most part, was confined to Dublin. There were mobilisations in Coalisland, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Mayo and various other places

but they failed to come to the assistance of the rebels in the capital. This failure was keenly felt afterwards and for Belfast republicans, we get the sense of regret in the Bureau of Military History (BMH) statement of David McGuinness. He recalled how Belfast republicans were reorganised in early 1917 after the botched attempt at a rising in Coalisland.

“The first move to effect a reorganisation was the notification by word of mouth for the volunteers to attend a meeting at premises opposite Forrester's Hall in Mill Street. This meeting was most informal, no proper chairman; each man had apparently something to say and said it. It was agreed that reorganisation would commence and if sufficient men were available from any of the old pre 1916



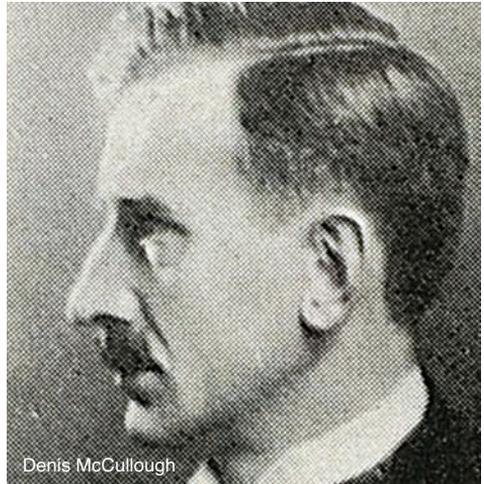
companies, they should reform into that company and appoint officers.” McGuinness showed a measured intelligence with great stress laid on accuracy. He had mobilised at Coalisland at Easter 1916 and was later a prominent Brigade Intelligence Officer and his statement strongly indicates disillusionment felt by the Belfast volunteers after the Coalisland debacle.

With the release of the BMH statements and the fine work of the Treasonable Felony Blog (TFB) we have at last a clear picture of what happened at Coalisland. We now have the names and addresses of those who took part and they can be accessed through Google. A list of officers and volunteers was compiled by a group of veterans led by Peter Burns who had been a senior military commander at Coalisland. This list identified the volunteers who were eligible for a pension for their service in the 1916 period and was submitted to a committee of the Belfast Brigade for checking. The list was compiled in 1936 but does not state how many, if any on the list took up the offer of a pension.

There are actually 156 names and addresses on the list, with 24 or more names than the 132 individuals who were previously believed to have mobilised. Cahal McDowell’s BMH statement goes

someway to explain why the latter figure was accepted. He explained that while three groups went by train to Coalisland on Easter Saturday, a further fourth group arrived on the Easter Sunday by which time a decision had been taken not to mobilise but to return to Belfast and this fourth group had been overlooked. Presumably if the fourth group had worked on night shifts or as barmen, they could not get away on the Saturday. From the start there had been problems with the mobilisation at Coalisland. Denis McCullough, who was the Chairman of the Civilian Committee of the Belfast Volunteers, was not informed about the date of the Rising until the week before Easter. He explained in his BMH statement that although he had been president of the IRB since late 1915, he was not part of the Military Committee of the IRB which planned the Rising and was not made aware of the proposed date or detailed plans of the Rising until the last moment. Thomas Clarke and Sean McDermott were key planners on the Military Committee and they proposed and seconded Denis McCullough as IRB president in 1915. Possibly they did so because Denis McCullough lived in Belfast and could not easily hear of their plans. This may have been because although they trusted Denis McCullough personally they were fully aware of the problems, which might confront the Nationalist population of

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Belfast should any leak of details about the proposed Rising reach the ears of the Security Forces or the UVF.

In 1916 Belfast had a population of around 350,000 but less than a quarter of them were Nationalists. Most of these Nationalists were keen supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) and large numbers of them had joined the British Army in part to strengthen John Redmond's demand for Home Rule. John Redmond was the leader of the IPP at this time and Joe Devlin was his very able assistant in Belfast. Essentially the Nationalists of Belfast were Home Rulers rather than Republicans. Those Irish volunteers in the city who had remained with Eoin MacNeill were few in number if highly motivated. The Unionists by

contrast had formed the Ulster Volunteer Force in early 1913 and were not only highly motivated but also armed. Members of the Military Committee of the IRB such as James Connolly and Sean McDermott had lived in the northern capital and were fully aware of the awful price the minority community in Belfast could pay in the event of an unsuccessful rising in Belfast or its environs. Connolly himself had addressed the Belfast Volunteers some months before the Rising hinting that a rising was imminent but stressed that no action whatsoever should be taken in Belfast itself.

Denis McCullough as a native of Belfast was fully aware of the consequences of a Rising and this in no doubt had a strong influence on his thinking on Easter

Sunday 1916. McCullough had been told the date of the Rising by a member of the IRB, Alf Cotton. His response was to rush to Dublin where he contacted Tom Clarke who confirmed that the volunteers were to mobilise on the Easter Sunday. The fact that McCullough was given details on what to do so late in the planning also goes some way to explain the chaos which ensued when the volunteers gathered at Coalisland that Sunday to link up with the Tyrone volunteers.

The orders were that both Belfast and Tyrone volunteers were joined together and either march or cycle the 200 miles from Dungannon to Galway, and there they would link up with Liam Mellows and his command. During this extraordinary journey, the volunteers were ordered not to fire a shot. Doctor Patrick McCartan who was in charge of the Tyrone volunteers showed no enthusiasm for the IRB's military committees planned for the North. He wrote later "long before Easter I had no heart in it as it came, and I could not inspire others with courage when I had none myself". His view was probably driven by practicality rather than fear. In any event the Tyrone volunteers themselves were to prove reluctant to obey orders, which they considered to be on the fantastic.

In Belfast Denis McCullough had a small but able group to work with. He himself

was chairperson of the military committee with Herbert Moore Pim as vice chair. Sam Heron was secretary and Thomas Wilson was treasurer. It says much of the non-sectarian nature of volunteers of the period that two of these four men were protestant. The military element of the volunteers was well officered. Their commandant was Peter Burns who had military experience from his experience as a Sergeant Major in the British Army. The quartermaster was Cahal McDowell and the two captains were Rory Haskins and Sean Kelly. Further to this, there were around 150 dedicated volunteers from Belfast.

Denis McCullough was forced to mobilise these volunteers at short notice. He took £100 from his own bank and sent Archie Heron to get what supplies he could from the Ulster volunteer stores. A meeting was called of the section leaders at a Falls Road shop and they were told about the mobilisation at Coalisland. Following this, the volunteers themselves were called in. They were given money to buy a single rail ticket to go to Dungannon on the Saturday before Easter to mobilise on Easter Sunday. Each volunteer was instructed to take two days rations. Peter Burns, whom Denis McCullough noted in his BMH statement as being very keen on action arranged for the rifles, ammunition and small arms belonging to

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the volunteers to be lifted from the Stewarts' house at Hannahstown and brought separately to Coalisland.

In the mid-1940s BMH statements by some Belfast volunteers who had mobilised at Coalisland in 1916 were taken and a guarantee was taken that the statements would not be released in their lifetime. As these statements were made, some thirty years after the event, there is often a lack of precision in detail, combined with a great desire to be as honest as possible. Thomas Wilson's BMH statement is typical.

“On the Saturday of Holy Week 3 batches of volunteers moved from Belfast by train for County Tyrone. The early batch was made up of men whose work ended early on Saturday. The second batch was made of men who were not ready to go in the first batch and the last batch was made up of men who worked late on Saturday evening”.

Harry Osborne's BMH statement amplifies the Thomas Wilson statement. Harry had to work late on the Saturday and on the Sunday morning, so he spoke with his brother Paddy who was also a volunteer. Harry gave Paddy a five pound note and told him he would see him in Coalisland on the Monday. This meant that although Thomas Wilson was

probably correct in his estimation that 120 to 130 volunteers had travelled to Coalisland on the Saturday, they would be further supplemented by more men on the Easter Sunday which accounts for the figure of 156 names of Belfast volunteers compiled by Peter Burns and others in 1936.

Peter Burns BMH statement adds yet more detail and catches the tension of the mobilisation. In his statement he recalled James Connolly's words ... “You will fire no shot in Ulster, you will proceed at all possible speed to join Mellows in Connaught ... If we win through we can deal with Ulster”

Burns' BMH statement tells us that 42 rifles of various types were available to the volunteers. He also noted that most of the volunteers carried their own short arms. Seamus Dobbyn's BMH statement reveals that although Seamus himself was mobilised for Coalisland, his father, Henry, who like Seamus was a member of the IRB, was considered too old for active service and therefore not mobilised. Henry Dobbyn arrived at Coalisland anyway carrying his own personal revolver. Peter Burns gives great credit to the members of Cumann na mBan who not only mobilised at Coalisland but also went to the Rising itself in Dublin. He specifically cites Nora Connolly, Ina

Connolly, Winifred Carney, Bridie Farrell, Lizzie Allen, Kathleen Murphy, Elizabeth and Nell Corr and a girl called O'Neill.

Cahal McDowell's BMH statement is at once the most detailed and the most revealing. He expressed his admiration for Sean Cusack who had been an original Training Officer and Military Commander of the Belfast volunteers. He mobilised at Coalisland at great risk, as he was a Reserve Sergeant in the British Army, who had been detailed for service with them during the Great War. Cusack showed the type of spirit that McDowell admired and his statement reveals a great deal of dissatisfaction with the failure of the leadership of the Belfast volunteers to follow the orders of the Military Council in Easter Week.

McDowell recalls that earlier McCullough had deputised him to take his place at a meeting in Dublin where McDowell met Patrick Pearse. McDowell recounted on that occasion that Pearse had warned him that only orders the volunteers were to heed when the mobilisation started, were the orders of Pearse and the Military Council and these were to be followed to the letter. On the Easter Saturday McDowell in his BMH statement recalled that the first batch of Belfast volunteers who went to Coalisland were mostly unemployed men and were commanded

by Cahal McDowell himself. The second batch to arrive under the command of Archie Heron and the third group were under the command of Peter Burns and Sean Kelly. The first batch arrived around midday on the Saturday, the second batch around 5 or 6pm and the third group around midnight. Another group were to arrive on the Sunday and there were also hopes that a Scottish contingent might mobilise too but they failed to arrive.

The first contingent under McDowell comprised of around 30 men, the second group had 20-25 men and the third 114 men. The first group were billeted three miles from Coalisland and the Second group one mile from Coalisland. The third group were billeted in Coalisland itself. It says something of the calibre of the intelligence structure of the volunteers, as they not only knew that they were being watched by the RIC, they knew the name of two of the Constables, Hanrahan and Kelly. On the Saturday night McDowell and Heron posted guards with revolvers to protect the volunteers in preparation for the Easter Sunday. What Cahal McDowell and Archie Heron did not know was that Denis McCullough was experiencing great difficulties. Two local priests had already tried to dissuade the leaders of Belfast and Tyrone volunteers to permit their men to mobilise in support of the Easter Rising.

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They insisted that the Rising in Dublin was to be the action of the numerically small Irish Citizens Army rather than the Irish Volunteers, that as any action was doomed to failure in any case and that they should heed Eoin McNeill's countermarching order and tell the volunteers to go home.

It seemed as if everything that Denis McCullough attempted on that Saturday and Sunday was marked by acrimony and confusion. Some volunteers from Coalisland and Dungannon expressed a willingness to fight but found the Military Council's instructions to be unrealistic as they stated that they would prefer to fight in their own area. McCullough's arguments with them were not going anywhere and the problem got worse when he himself was the only military causality of the mobilisation. His own personal weapon was not brought to Coalisland and his attempts to unload a small automatic he was given, resulted in him shooting himself through the left hand. McCullough already very emotional over the problems he was encountering was now for a time delirious as a result of the bullet wound. Nonetheless he and Herbert Moore Pim decided they would check and see if they could get support in other parts of Tyrone.

They toured Pomeroy, Beragh,

Sixmilecross and Omagh on the Sunday morning to see if the volunteers would rise. McCullough had a low opinion of the recently appointed military organiser in the area and his worst fears were vindicated when he found only in Beragh, where the volunteers were commanded by Hugh Rogers, was there a willingness to fight outside their own area. Lack of Information seems to have been the main problem. Even the prominent Sinn Féiner in Tyrone, Kevin O'Shea had not been told any great detail about the Rising from the Military Council.

McCullough went back to Coalisland where he found local volunteers were still arguing. Pat McCormick, a prominent IRB member from the Glens of Antrim, had arrived and could see the general confusion allied to the reluctance of the Tyrone volunteers to march to Connaught. He seems to have agreed with Denis McCullough's snap decision to bring the Belfast men home by train on the Sunday. After all, McCullough reasoned the men had only two days ration with them. This began when Seamus Dobbyn characterised as "the retreat from Moscow". McCullough held a meeting of section leaders and told them he would give the volunteers the train fare from Cookstown and that they should go home. Many of them demurred. Seamus Dobbyn recalled that the Section Leader Liam Gaynor was

adamant that both he and his men were willing to go to Connaught to fight, rather than march to Cookstown to catch the Belfast train. Cahal McDowell refused to obey Denis McCullough's order, pointing out that McCullough was essentially a civilian commander and that he was obeying Eoin McNeill rather than the Military Council of the IRB. He repeated what Pearse had previously told McDowell in Dublin.

McDowell's opposition to McCullough's order was only quelled when the Military Commander, Peter Burns, said that he was going to support McCullough and that he would put McDowell on a charge if he did not follow orders. We are not sure why Peter Burns made this decision but Seamus Dobbyn's BMH statement later explained that Dobbyn with two others, Cahal O'Brien and Liam Gayner were asked to leave the train back to Belfast with important plans and maps which were left with Dobbyn's relatives near Castledawson. These documents were given by Peter Burns with no explanation as to their importance.

On Easter Monday, Peter Burns reviewed the returned volunteers at 6:30am at Chapel Fields near Broadway on the Falls Road. He told them to go to work as usual but warned them that they should be prepared to be called at short notice for active service. In fact, 24 Belfast volunteer leaders were soon rounded up

and sent to Frongoch camp after the Rising and the volunteers went through a period of confusion and disillusionment. There was to be a further sting in the tail, Sean Cusack's BMH statement tells us that he approached Denis McCullough after the failed mobilisation to express the disappointment of the volunteers because of the events of Coalisland. While Cusack personally liked and admired McCullough, the ex-training officer felt it was his duty to explain to his civilian commander, that the volunteers had lost confidence in him. To give Denis McCullough his due, he accepted this well and held no grudges against any of the volunteers and continued to give great service to the republican cause. However he was never to be regarded again as a Military Leader.

The Coalisland mobilisation and the failure to comply with orders from the Military Council, was not unique to Belfast. Other parts of Ireland showed similar confusion. In Belfast too as in other parts of Ireland there was a perceptible rise in support for the Republican cause following the Easter Rising culminating in the great success of Sinn Féin in the khaki election of December 1918. If anything, the failure to act at Coalisland was to be a reminder to Belfast volunteers that often they would be required to follow orders, which did not always make a lot of sense initially.

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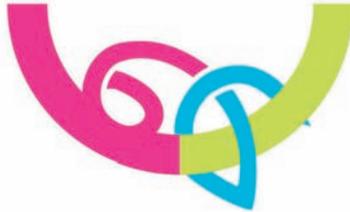
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