

# Experiencing the Irish Revolution in Donegal, 1919-1925



Councillor Wards (Deanna) then proposed (3)  
"that this meeting of the County Council  
earnestly urge Mr. Griffith & Mr. De Valera  
to close up the ranks of our Poile, and  
to bury their differences in the interests  
of the Country for which they have done  
so much rather than that those noble  
Irishmen and Women who were associated  
with them should be split into different  
Camps to the satisfaction of Ireland's  
enemies. That copies of this resolution  
be telegraphed to Mr. Griffith & Mr. De Valera,  
and that further copies be transmitted  
to the Six Deputies of the County  
Councillor J. Donnell (J.F.), seconded.  
Reports of Committees  
The Report of the under-mentioned Committee  
was adopted.  
Finance — Meeting held 13<sup>th</sup> Dec 1921

## Essays

by Dr Ben Rogers, Historian in Residence

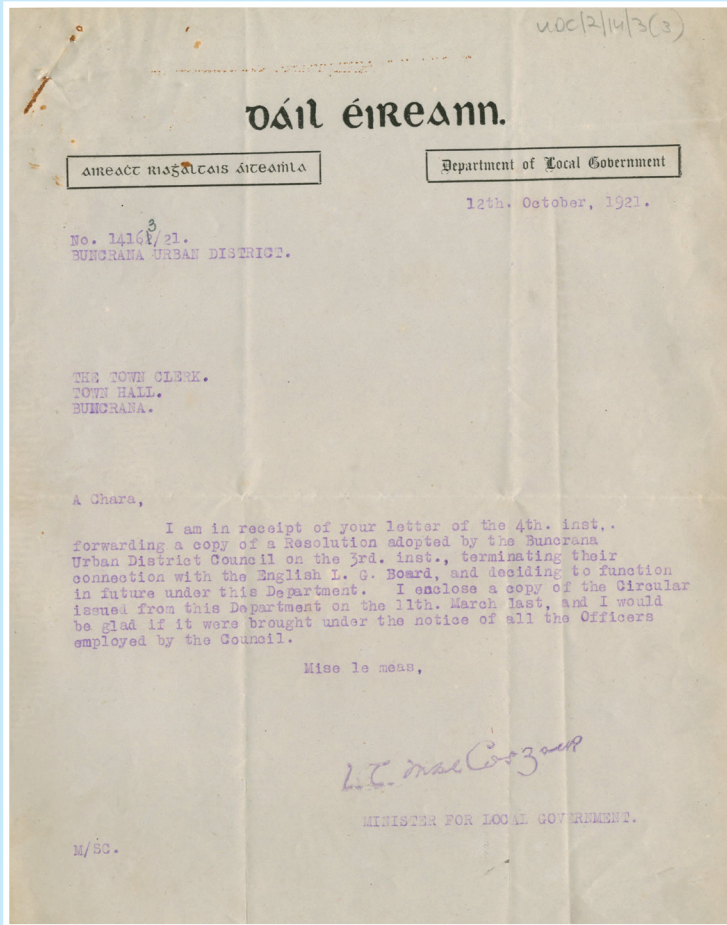
Donegal County Museum and Archives, Donegal County Council

Front Cover Image 1:

*Extract from Donegal County Council Minutes of Meetings relating to the Dáil Anglo-Irish Treaty debate, 31 December 1921* (Donegal County Archives)

Front Cover Image 2:

*Joseph Murray in Uniform* (Donegal County Archives)



Above:

*Letter from W. T. Cosgrave, Minister for Local Government, to The Clerk, Bunrana Urban District Council, 12 October 1921, relating to the Council's recognition of Dáil Éireann* (Donegal County Archives)

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County Council of Tir Conaill.

Copy Minutes of Proceedings at a Special Meeting held on the 31st day of December 1921.

Attendance

The members present were:-

Councillors Mac Fadden (Hon.), (Presiding),  
Bannor, Roberts (Wm.), Duffy, Anderson, Kelly (H. J.),  
Langan, Northern Mac Fadden (Chairman),  
Mr. Waddy, O'Donnell (Hugh), O'Donnell (J. P.),  
and Ward (Deputy)

The Solicitor to the Council was absent in attendance.

The following letter was read from the Chairman of the Council.

Killybegs,

30th December 1921.

Dear Sir

I am to-day in receipt of Summons to a Special Meeting of the Tir Conaill County Council on the 31st inst. I notice that the third item of the agenda deals with the articles of agreement for a Treaty signed by the Irish Plenipotentiaries and the British Delegation on the 6th inst.

As there is an understanding between the President of the Irish Republic and Mr. Arthur Griffiths, Chairman of the Irish Delegation, that no member of the Dail shall take part in any public discussion on these articles of agreement until the decision of the Dail is finally announced, I am therefore precluded from attendance at this meeting of the County Council

Bernard M. Fadden Esq.,  
Deputy Tir Conaill Co. Council,  
Lifford.

Laura Fairclough,  
P. J. Ward.

Donegal County Council Minutes of Meeting of 31 December 1921, members discussing the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

(Donegal County Archives)

# Introduction

The Decade of Centenaries 2012–2023 programme has provided excellent opportunities for fresh historical investigations into this formative period of Ireland’s history. Greater attention has now been paid to shared or different revolutionary experiences, the importance of gender, the role of violence, and the continuities that existed in local government and healthcare provision. Furthermore, advances in the digital humanities have preserved Ireland’s cultural heritage for future generations and have provided academic researchers and the public with excellent resources to examine the political, social, and cultural developments of this period. These enhancements will hopefully lead to a deeper understanding of the main events that took place between 1912 and 1923 and provide a recognition that the shared historical experiences of these years gave rise to very different narratives and memories.

This booklet of essays is the result of a project that was launched by Donegal County Council in 2021 as part of its Decade of Centenaries programme. It draws from the excellent online and physical records that are available to consult at Donegal County Archives, and the Military Service Pension Collection and Bureau of Military History records that are available online from the Military Archives, to provide a snapshot of the Irish Revolution in Donegal between 1919 and 1925. The six essays draw from recent scholarship on this period and provide detailed overviews of the main military, political, and social developments in the county. The essays focus more on how the Irish Revolution was experienced by ordinary people in Donegal rather than outlining how the military conflict was conducted in the county. These revolutionary experiences are examined using the detailed material that is available online in the Joseph Murray Collection at

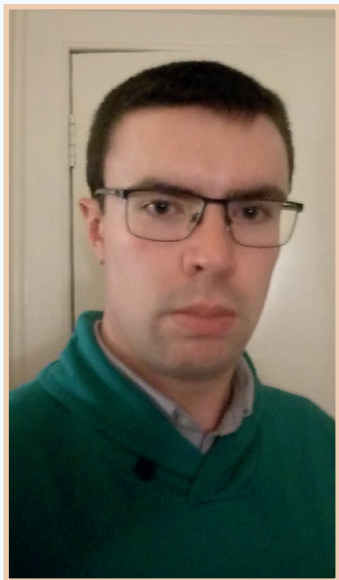
the County Archives, along with the substantial digital records that exist for Donegal's County Council, Rural District Councils, Urban District Councils, and Boards of Guardians. Digital records from the Military Archives are also consulted in the essays to expand upon the material in the County Archives.

The essays are based around these records and use case-studies to demonstrate the different revolutionary experiences in Donegal. The first essay looks at Joseph Murray and the No. 4 Brigade (First Northern Division). It uses Murray's extensive records from this period, and the statement that he provided to the Bureau of Military History in 1957, to show how his experience reflected that of the wider Volunteer movement in Donegal. The second essay expands on this theme by focusing on how the Irish Revolution was experienced by women in Donegal. This essay consults some of the many pension applications that were submitted by Donegal women after 1934, when they became eligible to apply, to demonstrate how they made an equal contribution to the military conflict as their male counterparts despite being frequently required to carry out 'gendered' roles.

The third and fourth essays focus on the Rural District Councils in Donegal to demonstrate the political transition that occurred in the county between 1919 and 1925. The essays will show how Donegal moved away from supporting constitutional nationalism, and groups such as the Irish Parliamentary Party, towards backing Sinn Féin and revolutionary government. Key events such as the local elections in June 1920 will be discussed to demonstrate how Sinn Féin's success in Donegal was more muted than the rest of the country. These essays will also address the practicalities of local government in Donegal and demonstrate how, despite the revolutionary aspirations that were issued in the Democratic Programme by Dáil Éireann in January 1919, financial retrenchment came to dominate the councils' proceedings.

The fifth essay focuses on similar problems in Donegal's towns by looking at the minutes of the county's Urban District Councils and

Town Commissioners. These councils faced difficulties in providing basic services, such as public lighting, water, and sewage works, after Sinn Féin's victory in the municipal elections in January 1920 deprived the councils of funds from the Local Government Board. Calls for urban improvement and housing construction were frequently abandoned to save money. The sixth and final essay addresses how Dáil Éireann's desire, as outlined in the Democratic Programme, to abolish the Poor Law system was implemented in Donegal. By 1919, Poor Law had become inextricably linked with healthcare provision since the workhouses, and the Boards of Guardians who administered them, had evolved into local hospitals. The essay will show how the revolutionary government's desire to reform healthcare led to heated debates between local communities and the County Council, and between the Council and the Dáil's Department of Local Government, on the future of healthcare in Donegal.



Overall, the booklet provides a brief and comprehensive analysis of how the Irish Revolution was experienced in Donegal. The themes that the essays address provide insights into the lives of the men and women who lived during this period, the wider social and political transitions that occurred in the county, and the excellent resources that are available at Donegal County Archives. The booklet will hopefully provide academics and the public with avenues for future research on Donegal's rich historical heritage.

Dr Ben Rogers.

## Acknowledgements

The Decade of Centenaries Commemorations Programme of the Culture Division, Donegal County Council, is supported by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media under the Decade of Centenaries Initiative 2012 – 2023.

Donegal County Museum and the Archives Service, Donegal County Council would like to thank Dr Ben Rogers, our Historian in Residence for the Decade of Centenaries, 2021, for his work as historian in residence. We would particularly like to acknowledge his work in researching and writing this book of essays. We believe these essays will further illuminate our knowledge of many of the social, economic and political aspects of life in Co. Donegal during the War of Independence and Civil War. It is also hoped that the book will assist people who are interested in this period in our history to continue to uncover the rich archival material available online and in our archives, museums and libraries.



# I

## **Revolutionary Experience in Donegal: Joseph Murray and No. 4 Brigade (First Northern Division)**

Since 2003, the opening and digitisation of records within the Military Archives has resulted in a fresh wave of scholarship on the tumultuous events between 1913 and 1923. The details that men and women provided in their applications for a pension under the Military Service Pension Acts of 1924 and 1934, and the witness statements that were provided to the Bureau of Military History after 1947, point to common social, cultural, and political factors that motivated people to become involved in revolutionary activity.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly the case for Donegal thanks to the numerous pension applications that exist for the county, the detailed brigade activity reports that were written to verify these applications, and the extensive material that exists in the Joseph Murray Collection at Donegal County Archives. By bringing this material together through a case-study of Joseph Murray and No. 4 Brigade (First Northern Division) we can gain a snapshot of revolutionary experience in Donegal.

Joseph Murray was born in Monaghan in 1893. Like the many young men who were drawn to nationalism, he was heavily involved with the GAA and the Gaelic League and joined Sinn Féin shortly after qualifying as a primary school teacher in 1914. Murray moved to Bundoran in 1915 to take up a teaching post and organised a company of Irish Volunteers in the town in 1917. He was typical of the single

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1 Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution 1913-1923* (London, 2015), pp. 17-23; Marie Coleman, 'Military service pensions for veterans of the Irish revolution, 1916-23', *War in History*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2013), pp. 201-21

young men with steady jobs in urban settings whom the late Peter Hart identified as being the backbone of the Volunteer movement.<sup>2</sup>

Between 1918 and 1919 the Volunteers in Donegal were organised into four brigades that were loosely based on the county's four parliamentary constituencies (North, South, East, West). By 1921 these brigades consisted of No.1 Brigade (West Donegal), No. 2 Brigade (North-East Donegal), No. 3 Brigade (South-West Donegal), and No. 4 Brigade (South-East Donegal).<sup>3</sup> In his statement to the Bureau of Military History in 1957, Murray noted that he became involved with the No. 4 Brigade after 1918. He initially protected political meetings in Ballyshannon, such as during a visit by Éamon de Valera in 1919. By the end of 1919 the Volunteer companies were remodelled into battalions. Murray was involved with the 1st Battalion which consisted of companies from Bundoran, Ballyshannon, Belleek, Ballintra, Donegal town, Kinlough and Tullaghan (Co. Leitrim).<sup>4</sup>



*Joseph Murray poses with gun, c. 1920*  
(Donegal County Archives)

Volunteer activity in Donegal, as Hart, Liam Ó Duibhir, and Okan Ozseker have demonstrated, was not as intense as the hotbeds of Cork, Longford, and Dublin.<sup>5</sup>

- 2 Peter Hart, 'The social structure of the IRA, 1916-23', *Historical Journal*, vol. 42, no. 1 (1999), pp. 207-31.
- 3 Okan Ozseker, *Forging the Border: Donegal and Derry in Times of Revolution, 1911-1925* (Newbridge, 2019), p. 112.
- 4 Military Archives, Bureau of Military History, WS. 1566, pp. 3-6.
- 5 Peter Hart, 'The Geography of Revolution in Ireland, 1917-1923', *Past & Present*, 155 (1997), 142-76, at p. 146; Liam Ó Duibhir, *The Donegal Awakening: Donegal and the War of Independence* (Cork, 2009), ch. 1; Ozseker, *Forging the Border*, pp. 104-105.

The county's latent conservatism, dependence on seasonal migration, emigration, and the influence of the Catholic Church, particularly the influence of Bishop Patrick O'Donnell of the Diocese of Raphoe, meant that the First Northern Division did not pursue an extensive military campaign. Much of the No. 4 Brigade's activities were centred on local raids on customs houses, post offices, and Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.) barracks. These activities built on an established tradition of localised violence in Donegal that went back to the Land War of the nineteenth century. In his application for a pension, and his Bureau of Military History statement, Murray noted that he participated in a raid on the customs house in Ballyshannon on 30 May 1920, an attack on R.I.C officers in Gortahork on 6 August, and a series of raids on the barracks in Bundoran and Ballyshannon at the end of that month.<sup>6</sup>

These attacks reflect what Ozseker has termed the 'reactionary' nature of the Irish Volunteers' campaign in Donegal. Military attacks were often poorly planned in response to the increased presence of the R.I.C. or Crown forces in parts of the county. Donegal's Volunteers frequently focused on local objectives that were perceived as easy to accomplish. Reprisals from Crown forces, which in turn led to spiralling levels of cyclical violence, did not match the levels that were seen in Cork and Longford.<sup>7</sup> The Brigade Activity Report that was written for the No. 4 Brigade in the late 1930s verifies the localised nature of the Volunteers' activities. Raids on R.I.C. barracks and post offices, the cutting of telegraph and phone lines, along with ambushes on Crown forces from Finner Camp outside Ballyshannon, dominate the report.<sup>8</sup>

6 Military Archives, Bureau of Military History, WS. 1566, pp. 7-9; Donegal County Archives, Joseph Murray Collection, P/183/8/2/1 (11) – (18).

7 Peter Hart, *The IRA and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916-23* (Oxford, 1998); Marie Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish Revolution, 1910-1923* (Dublin, 2003).

8 Military Archives, Military Service Pension Collection, A/43(2); Eunan O'Halpin, 'The Brigade Activity Reports in Context', in Cécile Gordon (ed.), *The Military Service (1916-1923) Pension Collection: Brigade Activity Reports* (Dublin: Department of Defence, 2018), pp. 28-43.

In his statement to the Bureau of Military History, Murray recounted a daring raid that took place on the barracks at Belleek on 5 September 1920. The execution of this attack depended on procuring an ambulance from the local workhouse hospital at Ballyshannon. The workhouse's Board of Guardians, as a later essay will demonstrate, consisted of Sinn Féin members after the June 1920 local elections. One guardian, James Connolly, was an active member of the No. 4 Brigade. Murray's statement shows how the Brigade's contacts on the Board allowed them to acquire the ambulance during a staged raid in which the Volunteers disguised themselves in British army uniforms. The masquerading Volunteers, along with more raiders hiding in the ambulance, then proceeded to Belleek barracks where they used forged documents from Finner Camp to gain entry. The barracks was then raided for arms and set alight.<sup>9</sup> These activities were not ignored by the Crown authorities and reprisals, such as the murder of James Connolly's father during a raid by R.I.C. officers on 14 September, demonstrate that retaliatory attacks did occur during this tumultuous period.

One key point that emerges from Murray's own papers, as well as the material that he provided in his application for a military service pension certificate in 1955, and to the Bureau of Military History, was the disorganised nature of the Volunteers' leadership in Donegal. An ambush that was planned at Tullaghan in October 1920 was abandoned due to poor planning. Murray, in his statement to the Bureau, suspected that information was being leaked to the R.I.C. after he and other battalion leaders were nearly arrested by Crown forces during a conference at Bundoran later that year.

Ineffective leadership was common across the county. Following the arrest of Thomas McShea and Patrick Johnston, Murray was elected O/C (Officer Commanding) of the Bundoran Battalion in April 1921. With the partition of Ireland imminent and the War of Independence intensifying in the months before the Truce (11 July 1921), one of Murray's major tasks was to maintain Volunteer morale. A report

<sup>9</sup> Military Archives, Bureau of Military History, WS. 1566, pp. 10-11.

Ballyshannon 11. 9. 20

R. I. Constabulary  
Co. Inspector's Office,  
Enniskillen.  
23. 9. 20

Transmitted.

9.9. Carroll  
Capt. D. J. O'Connell

The Clerk  
Belleek R.I.C.  
Ballyshannon.

On Sunday the 5<sup>th</sup> inst Belleek R.I.C. Barracks were maliciously entered by armed & disguised men who after raiding the Barracks and destroying property therein set the building on fire on same date. The Police visited the scene and found the following articles were destroyed by fire Namely a Suit of clothes Undercloathing Boots brushes Valve belt Pouch frog leggings portions of which were visible it is also alleged that Bank notes a Silver watch & Sundry articles were maliciously destroyed by fire, and the property of Constable Patrick Barron.

Michl Andrew Sergeant  
R.I.C.

To Cormac McGowan Esq.  
Clerk of the Rural District Council of Belleek  
Ballyshannon

RIC Report on the raid on Belleek Barracks on 5 September 1920  
(Donegal County Archives)

book for April to June 1921 contained in Murray's papers shows how the No. 4 Brigade responded to these challenges. This included the implementation of the 'Belfast Boycott' that had been decreed by the Dáil the previous year in response to sectarian attacks in Belfast. In April 1921 the Volunteers seized goods from Bundoran railway station and raided businesses in Ballyshannon and Bundoran that traded with blacklisted Belfast firms. Volunteers who failed to turn up to meetings were arrested. Furthermore, aware that the creation of Northern Ireland was imminent, Volunteers increased attacks and raids near the border.<sup>10</sup> It is likely Murray's ability to coordinate his battalion was behind his promotion to Brigade Adjutant in May 1921 and then to Vice O/C of the No. 4 Brigade in June.

The extensive papers that Murray preserved after he became Vice O/C provide further insights into the ambiguous period that followed the truce. Although hostilities between the Volunteers and Crown forces were meant to cease, there were moments in Donegal that challenged this. The 'Belfast Boycott' was still in effect and Murray's papers show how the Volunteers damaged printworks for newspapers, such as the *Donegal Vindicator* and *Donegal Independent*, that were alleged to print on behalf of Belfast firms.<sup>11</sup> There were also sporadic raids in the Ballyshannon area, such as an attack on Ballintra Railway Station in July 1921, but the Volunteers frequently denied their involvement.<sup>12</sup>

Murray's records also demonstrate the sense of optimism that was felt by most Volunteers after the truce. Most of the material in the collection comes from after July 1921. By this time British authority, as the essays on local government will demonstrate, had collapsed and Volunteer activity was now on public display. Murray's correspondence from this period shows how Volunteer drills and fundraising efforts were now openly organised.<sup>13</sup> These events were now advertised more freely in sympathetic newspapers, like the *Donegal Democrat*. On

10 Donegal County Archives, Joseph Murray Collection, P/183/3/6, (1) – (4).

11 Donegal County Archives, Joseph Murray Collection, P/183/7/2.

12 Donegal County Archives, Joseph Murray Collection, P/183/3/8/3.

13 Donegal County Archives, Joseph Murray Collection, P/183/3/8/6; P/183/3/8/8.

4 November 1921, the newspaper provided an extensive report of a dance that was held for the No. 4 Brigade in Ballyshannon.<sup>14</sup> A similar pattern was evident across the southern counties as Dáil Éireann and the Volunteers operated freely before divisions emerged after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty on 6 December 1921.<sup>15</sup>

Battalion headquarters  
P/183/415/2  
at Ballyshannon  
4th Brigade  
The Northern Div.  
27th May 22

Brig. J Murray  
4th Brigade  
The Northern Div.

Since having your report of the 26th inst. I beg to state that several incidents of an unlawful nature have occurred in the Battalion area.

During the past three weeks great activity by forces acting under the Executive has been daily in evidence. Numerous raids have been carried out especially on motor carriages from which important parts of motor cars have been stolen, and threats of violence used towards the proprietors on one occasion.

Several arrests have also been made by Executive forces, of men alleged to be cattle thieves, and it has since come my hearing that these men have been handed over to the B.S. troops in Sligo.

On the evening of the 26th inst. Executive forces under Patrick Toberty entered Kesh, a village in the village for about two miles after which Toberty commanded several men in local establishments for his men. After leaving the village Toberty approached the cottages of the local constabulary and threatened resistance and arrest if any force of the local constabulary took place.

Murray's papers also provide an excellent insight into the most significant breach of the Truce during the battles that occurred in Pettigo and Belleek between May and June 1922. This conflict, which began with an incursion by B-Special division of the newly constituted Royal Ulster Constabulary into Pettigo, was the only time that Crown forces used artillery against the Irish Volunteers during the War of Independence. The conflict was caused by ongoing activity in the border area by the Volunteers, and the erection of garrisons by the Provisional Government on the Donegal side of the border. Tensions had also been raised by a propaganda campaign by the Belfast government on behalf of

Extract from the report of James P O'Carroll,  
Battalion HQ., 4th Brigade, to Brigadier Joseph  
Murray, 4th Brigade, reporting on incidents  
in the lead up to the Civil War in south Donegal,  
27 May 1922

(Donegal County Archives)

14 Donegal Democrat, 4 November 1921.

15 Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble*, pp. 257-68.

the Unionists living in the area.<sup>16</sup> Murray was not directly involved in the battle, but his extensive account of it, and his later retention of the commemorative literature that related to the battle, reflect how the intensity of this skirmish made many Donegal people aware of the harsh realities of partition.<sup>17</sup>

Murray's own activities after the Civil War broke out in June 1922 are unclear. His statement to the Bureau of Military History does not mention the Treaty or the Civil War, and his private papers have little to say about the conflict. His Volunteer activities seem to have ceased after he joined An Garda Síochána in 1922 and he was later transferred to Cavan where he retired with the rank of superintendent in 1958.

The activities of Joseph Murray and the No. 4 Brigade provide a snapshot of how the Irish Revolution was experienced in Donegal. Murray, like many Irishmen of his generation, was drawn to nationalism through a common cultural and political background. His activities in Donegal, along with those of the No. 4 Brigade, demonstrate both the 'reactionary' nature of the Volunteers' campaign in the county and the localised nature of their attacks. The experience of revolution in Donegal was not as intense as other counties, but the absence of such intensity should not distract us from the wider social, cultural, and political, factors that drew men like Murray towards Irish independence. These factors are evident in Murray's own records and hence they are an excellent resource for any future scholarship to draw from.

16 Liam Ó Duibhir, *Donegal & The Civil War: The Untold Story* (Cork, 2011), pp. 119-31.

17 Donegal County Archives, Joseph Murray Collection, P/183/4/5/3; Ozseker, *Forging the Border*, 169-73.



## 2

### **Pension Applications and the Revolutionary Experience of Women in Donegal, 1919-1925**

On 2 August 1922, the *Freemans Journal* reported a raid that had taken place on the railway near Mountcharles. Occurring over a month after the outbreak of the Civil War, a train was held up by two ‘irregular’ Volunteers.<sup>1</sup> One of these Volunteers was Eithne Coyle, who was perhaps one of the best-known figures from the Irish Revolution in Donegal and was one of the island’s leading revolutionary women. Coyle’s reputation stems from her being one of the few women who engaged in military attacks on Crown forces during the War of Independence and Free State forces during the Civil War. However, Coyle, like many Donegal women during this time, shared common social, cultural, and political experiences that influenced their participation in the revolution. The revolutionary experiences of Irish women have only recently received a thorough historical investigation thanks to scholars such as Linda Connolly, Mary McAuliffe, and Senia Pašeta.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the women who applied for a military service pension after 1934, when groups such as *Cumann na mBan* became eligible to apply, submitted substantial evidence to demonstrate their revolutionary experience.<sup>3</sup> This essay will focus on some of the many Donegal women who submitted pension applications and address how the information they provided reflected the wider experience of women during the revolution.

1 *Freemans Journal*, 2 August 1922.

2 Linda Connolly (ed.), *Women and the Irish Revolution* (Newbridge, 2020); Mary McAuliffe, *Margaret Skinnider* (Dublin, 2020); Senia Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 2013).

3 Coleman, ‘Military service pensions’, pp. 201-21.

The Donegal women who were involved in the Irish Revolution, like their male counterparts, shared common cultural and political experiences that drew them towards nationalism. Many were actively involved in the Gaelic League and helped to establish Cumann na mBan branches in their communities. Cumann na mBan, which was a republican organisation for women, was an important forum for Donegal women to discuss nationalist ideas and acted as a network that allowed them to aid the military conflict. Hana Blaney and May Fullerton, in their pension applications, stated that they were instrumental in setting up a Cumann na mBan branch in Rossnakill on the Fanad peninsula. Meetings were frequently held in Fullerton's home which served as a local shop and pub. Hana's home was used to store arms during the military conflict.<sup>4</sup> (Hana's husband was Neal Blaney, the local Volunteers battalion O/C).

Some of the key roles that Cumann na mBan performed during the military conflict involved communications and intelligence gathering. This is evident in most of the pension statements from Donegal. Mary Gallagher, who was active with the Cumann na mBan branch in Ballyshannon that aided the No. 4 Brigade, stated in her application that she was a dispatch carrier for the local battalion. She further claimed that her house acted as a communications hub for Volunteers in Sligo, Donegal, and Derry. This was likely given that her father, John Kane, commanded the Ballyshannon battalion.

Brigid Cunningham, who was active in the Cumann na mBan branch in Glenswilly, transported guns and ammunition to Volunteers in the surrounding area.<sup>5</sup> These activities were not unique to Donegal since Cumann na mBan members, whether through their fundraising or intelligence gathering, were essential to the revolutionary government's military campaign across Ireland. Women were generally perceived less suspiciously than men who were often 'on the run' from the authorities. This meant that women could scout or carry weapons without being

4 Military Archives, Military Service Pensions Collection, MSP34REF52817; MSP34REF51766.

5 Military Archives, Military Service Pensions Collection, MSP34REF36888.

under the same level of scrutiny.<sup>6</sup> However, this did not prevent some women from being investigated. May Fullerton noted in her application that her shop and pub in Rossnakill was raided for arms by the Black and Tans in 1920.<sup>7</sup>

What is noticeable from these applications is that the roles of many members of Cumann na mBan, during the military campaign, were seen as subordinate to that of the Volunteers. These often gendered roles included helping the injured, washing clothes, and providing meals.<sup>8</sup> Lena Duffy and Mary Meehan stated in their pension applications that they frequently catered for the local Volunteers and hid them when they were 'on the run'.<sup>9</sup> These gendered stereotypes were also emphasised in the national discourse. On 16 December 1921, the *Donegal Democrat* reported on military drills that were conducted by the Volunteers at Ballintra. The newspaper emphasised that the local members of Cumann na mBan showed 'what they were capable of doing on short notice, when they prepared and served over 1000 men with tea'.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the information that women provided in their pension applications often proved that they were overlooked in the official narrative of the revolution. Hana Blaney noted in her pension application that she acted as a scout prior to an attack on Fanad Lighthouse that was conducted by her husband and the local Volunteer battalion on 4 September 1920.<sup>11</sup> However, Dr J.P. McGinley, the Letterkenny Volunteer commander and future T.D. in the Second Dáil, also commanded this attack and did not mention Hana in his later statement to the Bureau of Military History.<sup>12</sup>

The divisions within Irish nationalism caused by the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty on 6 December 1921 are also evident in the pension

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6 Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble*, p. 212.

7 Military Archives, Military Service Pension Collection, MSP34REF52817.

8 John Borgonovo, 'Cumann na mBan, Martial Women, and the Irish Civil War', in Connolly (ed.), *Women and the Irish Revolution*.

9 Military Archives, Military Service Pension Collection, MSP34REF5223; MSP34REF35425.

10 *Donegal Democrat*, 16 December 1921.

11 Military Archives, Military Service Pension Collection, MSP34REF51766.

12 Military Archives, Bureau of Military History, WS. 1473, pp. 8-9.

applications that were submitted. Unlike the split that occurred in the Volunteers after the Dáil ratified the Treaty on 7 January 1922, Cumann na mBan members overwhelmingly voted to reject the Treaty at a convention on 5 February. This attitude filtered into the actions that some women took in Donegal in response to the increasing political polarisation. The raid that Eithne Coyle conducted at Mountcharles in August 1922, mentioned earlier, stemmed jointly from her opposition to the Treaty and her continued support of the ‘Belfast boycott’.



*Eithne Coyle (Centre)*

(Courtesy of University College Dublin Archives)

The boycott had been officially suspended earlier in the year during the Provisional Government’s attempted conciliation of the Government of Northern Ireland.<sup>13</sup> Other Cumann na mBan members in Donegal, such as Mary Meehan, also transported arms for the Anti-Treaty forces

<sup>13</sup> Cormac Moore, *Birth of the Border: The Impact of Partition in Ireland* (Newbridge, 2019), p. 123.

in the county.<sup>14</sup> However, the ability of women to conduct intelligence services was not as extensive during the Civil War. Free State forces, unlike Crown forces, could easily recognise their opponents and knew how to weaken them.<sup>15</sup> Hana Blaney, who took the Anti-Treaty side with her husband, stated that the arms dump at her house in Rosnakill was raided by Free State forces in 1922. She subsequently ceased her Anti-Treaty activities after Charles Daly, Sean Larkin, Daniel Enwright, and Timothy O'Sullivan were executed at Drumboe Castle on 14 March 1923 under the Free State's execution policy. However, she continued to advocate on behalf of Anti-Treaty prisoners in the years that followed.<sup>16</sup> These experiences were not just unique to women in Donegal but demonstrate how the military conflict had wider social ramifications in the county.

These ramifications are visible if we consider the violence that occurred towards women in Donegal during the revolution. While it is now widely accepted that women suffered violence during the revolution, the official records only reveal specific types of violence and ignore others. Forced haircutting, as Connolly has shown, is now accepted as a widespread and gender-specific practice that occurred during the revolution.<sup>17</sup> Victims of haircutting were generally accused of having colluded with enemy forces through personal or business relationships. The records of the Rural District Councils contain much information on haircutting as victims frequently submitted compensation claims to the councils for malicious injury. On 11 December 1920, Ellen Gillen submitted a claim for £100 to Ballyshannon Rural District Council along with a report from the R.I.C. that verified that her head had been shaved the previous month.<sup>18</sup>

14 Military Archives, Military Service Pension Collection, MSP34REF35425.

15 Borgonovo, 'Cumann na mBan'.

16 Military Archives, Military Service Pension Collection, MSP34REF51766.

17 Connolly, 'Towards a Further Understanding of the Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Women Experienced in the Irish Revolution', in Connolly (ed.), *Women and the Irish Revolution*

18 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/11/15, 11 December 1920, p. 98.

The following Letters and Reports were read, and Orders made thereon, as follows:—

Read letter from the Local Government Board date 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1920. giving particulars of Interest on Local Loans.

Read letter from the Hibernian General and Fire Insurance Co Ltd. 49 Dame St Dublin stating that the Company are now allowing a discount of 15% off the Annual premiums in consideration of the District Council having agreed to continue the Insurance with the Company for a period of five years.

Read letter from Dail Eireann, Department of Local Government date 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1920. with reference to the Auditing of the accounts.

Minute:—

"Left over without meeting".

The following Malicious Injury Claims were submitted and no action taken.

Mrs. M. Lysoett	Burning of Stack of Hay	£200:0:0
William Perry	Damage to Windows	100:0:0
George Hughes	Damage to Floor	40:0:0
Ellen Gillen	Hair Cut off her head	100:0:0

Report signed by Seagh Fannion R. I. C. Ballyshannon date 27<sup>th</sup> November, 1920. re cutting of the hair off Ellen Gillen's head was read.

Report signed by Seagh Conilly, R. I. C. Bundoran date 8<sup>th</sup> inst re burning of a stack of hay on Mr Arthur Rippey's farm - the townland of Magheracor was read.

Extract from Ballyshannon RDC Minutes of meeting, 11 December 1920

(Donegal County Archives)

The council records do not provide further context on why such attacks occurred, and although the reasons outlined above undoubtedly played a part in some of the attacks, other motives may also have been a factor. More serious instances of violence against women during this period, such as physical or sexual assault, also certainly occurred but such instances are hardly mentioned in the official records due to the unwillingness of the affected to report such crimes or the reluctance of the authorities to pursue them.

One of the key findings that emerges from the pension applications of women in Donegal is the fact that the process was very protracted and sometimes unsuccessful. Although members of Cumann na mBan were eligible to apply for pensions after 1934, they had to go through a long process to acquire one since the official attitude was that no 'soft pensions' were to be issued.<sup>19</sup> Hana Blaney applied for a pension in December 1936 and had to jump through a series of bureaucratic hoops before she was successful in September 1941. These tasks included providing an account of her activities during the War of Independence in her initial application, presenting a statement to the pension officers which was then questioned during a transcribed interview, and seeking references from former members of the No. 2 Brigade.<sup>20</sup>

Blaney's experience was common among most of the Donegal women who applied for a pension. Lena Duffy, for example, applied for a pension in 1935 and had to get Cormac Breslin, Fianna Fáil T.D. for Donegal West, to supply a character reference for her in 1938. She was not awarded a pension until 1940 and the pension was awarded for just over one year of service during the military conflict.<sup>21</sup> Male applicants for a pension, by contrast, often experienced a shorter waiting period for their application to be considered and received an award that was based on longer years of service. Neal Blaney, Hana's husband, applied for a pension in 1934 and, despite having to complete similar

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19 Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble*, pp. 319-27.

20 Military Archives, Military Service Pension Collection, MSP34REF51766.

21 Military Archives, Military Service Pension Collection, MSP34REF5223.

administrative tasks, was awarded a pension in 1937 to reflect his near eight years of military service.<sup>22</sup>

Women were just as important to the Irish Revolution in Donegal as their male counterparts. The pension applications that were submitted after 1934 demonstrate that Donegal women, like the Volunteers, had common cultural and political experiences that drew them towards nationalist politics. Most of the women who submitted applications were members of Cumann na mBan and aided the military conflict through intelligence and logistics services. Despite this, many Donegal women still performed gendered roles during the Irish Revolution and violence against women was common. Furthermore, the pension applications for Donegal suggest that the services that women provided were not held in the same esteem as their male counterparts and this leaves the door open for further research.



*Cumann na mBan, Annagry, Co Donegal, 1922, L-R Mary Phaidí Bhigh, Annie William, Biddy William, Roise Jimmy Theague, Mary William*

22 Military Archives, Military Service Pension Collection, MSP34REF32265.



### 3

## **Rural District Councils in Donegal, 1918-20: Constitutional Nationalism in Transition**

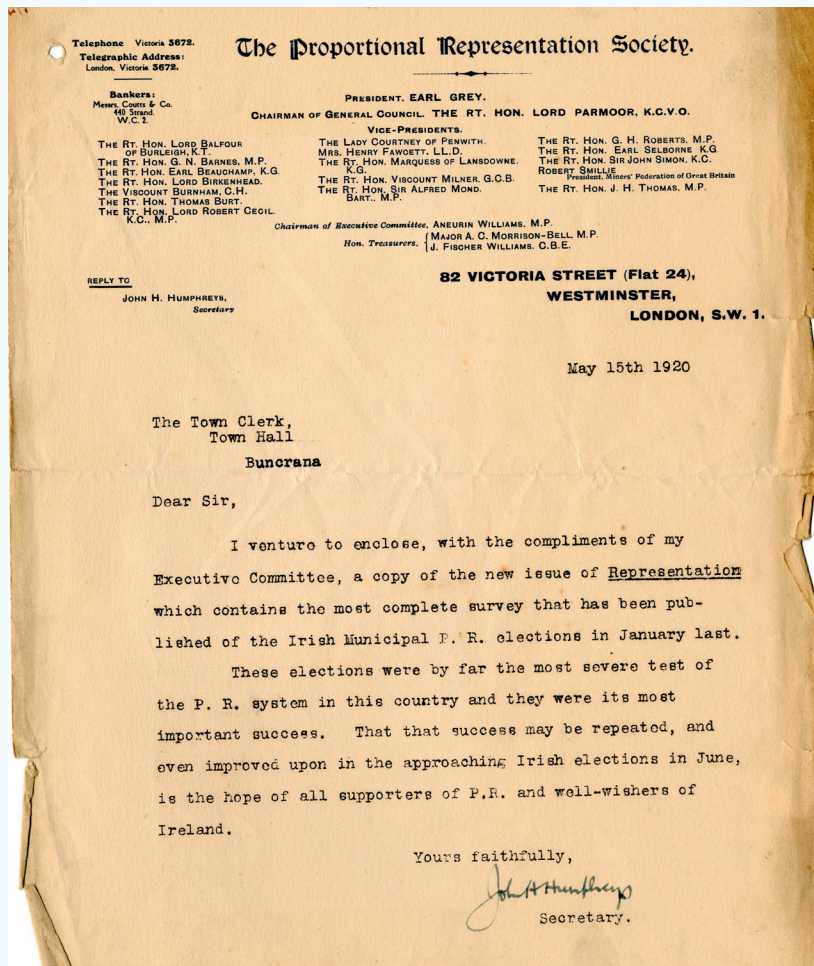
On 3 September 1920, the members of Letterkenny Rural District Council voted to recognise ‘Dáil Éireann as the duly elected [and] de jure Government of the Irish people’. A further resolution followed on 3 December 1920 when it was moved that ‘the English Local Gov[ernmen]t board be not further recognised’.<sup>1</sup> This endorsement of Ireland’s revolutionary parliament, which had first met on 21 January 1919 and consisted of the Sinn Féin members who had abstained from Westminster after their victory in the 1918 General Election, was a remarkable development for Donegal. Although Sinn Féin had won three out of the four seats for Donegal in Westminster in 1918, including one by Joseph Sweeney, a veteran of the 1916 Rising, the county’s transition towards revolutionary politics was not clear-cut. Prior to the Conscription Crisis in 1918, which had facilitated Sinn Féin’s electoral success, Donegal had been a bastion of support for constitutional nationalism.

There was strong support for the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) and, to a lesser extent, the Ancient Order of Hibernians. This remained the case in the localities as the IPP, along with some Unionists, retained control of Donegal’s Rural District Councils until Sinn Féin’s further electoral success in the June 1920 local elections. Sinn Féin’s control of the Councils after 1920 was not absolute. The introduction of proportional representation, along with latent support for the IPP and Unionism, meant that councillors from these groups remained

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1 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/6/1/12, 3 September 1920, p. 181; 3 December 1920, p. 211.

influential. However, the transition within the Rural District Councils in Donegal during this period reflects what Diarmaid Ferriter has referred to as a 'parallel political War of Independence' as Sinn Féin cemented its control over local government which helped to alienate the population from the British authorities.<sup>2</sup>



*Letter from the Proportional Representation Society to Buncrana RDC, regarding the 1920 election, 15 May 1920 (Donegal County Archives)*

2 Ferriter, *A Nation and not a Rabble*, p. 214.

Rural District Councils had been established under the Local Government (Ireland) Act in 1898 to quell the demands for a Home Rule Parliament in Dublin. The Councils replaced the Sanitary Districts which had existed under the Poor Law Unions. The latter had been established under the Irish Poor Law Act in 1838, but they only assumed responsibility for housing, roads, cemeteries, and sanitary services. The Poor Law Unions, as will be expanded upon in a later essay, continued to exist and many local councillors were also elected to sit on the Boards of Guardians that administered the Unions. The Councils were funded through the collection of local rates from households and businesses. Important areas such as education and major road construction were the responsibility of Donegal County Council. The Local Government Board, based in Dublin's Custom House, oversaw the Councils and provided grants and loans to fund services.<sup>3</sup>

By the time that they were abolished in 1925 there were eight Rural District Councils in Donegal. These were Ballyshannon, Donegal Town, Dunfanaghy, Glenties, Inishowen, Letterkenny, Milford, and Stranorlar. There were also Rural District Councils in Strabane No. 2 (Lifford), and Londonderry No. 2 (Burt, Killea, Bridgend). However, the creation of Northern Ireland in May 1921 resulted in these councils being absorbed by Stranorlar and Inishowen councils since their boundaries conflicted with the new national border. Larger towns such as Letterkenny, Buncrana, Bundoran, and Ballyshannon, as will be shown in a later essay, were administered by Urban District Councils and Town Commissioners. The Rural District Councils usually convened once a month and operated out of the Union workhouses.

The extensive minutes that survive for Donegal's Rural District Councils provide a unique insight into how the Irish Revolution was experienced

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3 Arlene Crampsie, 'Governmentality and locality: an historical geography of rural district councils in Ireland, 1898-1925', (Unpublished PhD Thesis: Trinity College Dublin, 2008); Matthew Porter, *The Municipal Revolution in Ireland: A Handbook of Urban Government in Ireland since 1800* (Newbridge, 2011), ch. 6; Diarmaid Ferriter, '*Lovers of Liberty?: Local Government in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland*' (National Archives of Ireland: Dublin, 2001).

in the localities. Between 1919 and 1925 the Councils carried out their daily functions regardless of their political composition or the wider military conflict. They inspected local farms, leased cottages under the Labourers (Ireland) Acts (1906, 1911, & 1919), regulated the local fuel supply, considered claims of damage for malicious injury, and maintained waterworks and sewage schemes in the district. These issues dominated most of the meetings that took place in Donegal's Rural Districts. However, the Councils also responded to national problems such as the Spanish flu pandemic between 1918 and 1920. In January 1919, it was reported that Dunfanaghy Rural District could only combat an outbreak of flu thanks to a generous private contribution to the district's fever hospital.<sup>4</sup>

The Rural District Councils maintained these services in various ways. The collection of local rates was inconsistent and before the local elections in June 1920 most councils relied on the annual subsidy of £1.5 million that the Local Government Board provided. Ratepayers who refused to pay were frequently prosecuted at the County courts and, as was the case with Joseph Hegarty who applied to Letterkenny Rural District Council for a labourers' cottage in November 1919, refusal to pay prevented people from acquiring a cottage.<sup>5</sup> Other councils had to borrow to fund works needing to be carried out, notably Milford Rural District Council. This Council borrowed large sums of money from the Northern Bank in Rathmullan to build waterworks there for the Royal Navy at Lough Swilly.<sup>6</sup> The collection of rates and the refusal of payment, as the next essay will demonstrate, would become a greater problem for Sinn Féin after June 1920 when they were deprived of Local Government Board funds.

Prior to the local elections to the Rural District Councils in June 1920 the councils already had a history of lobbying on national issues. The IPP

4 *Derry Journal*, 27 January 1919.

5 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny RDC – Minutes, RDC/6/1/12, 6 November 1919, p. 21.

6 Donegal County Archives, Milford Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/7/1/22, 11 January 1919, p. 24.

and the Catholic Church, through figures such as Bishop O'Donnell, had established an extensive network in national and local politics.<sup>7</sup> This was evident when the possibility of conscription emerged in early 1918. On 18 April 1918, Inishowen Rural District Council protested against conscription and resolved that they were 'justified in resisting the measure by every means in our power'.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately conscription was not introduced, but the outrage that it caused facilitated Sinn Féin's electoral success in the 1918 General Election. Further evidence of political organisation within the Rural District Councils can be seen in how the councils responded to the imminent partition of Ireland in 1919 and, to a lesser extent, the Education (Ireland) Bill.

By 1919 it was apparent that the effectiveness of the Unionist opposition that had emerged to challenge the Home Rule Bill in 1912 would result in the partition of part of Ulster from the rest of Ireland. The Government of Ireland Bill, which was introduced in early 1920, and became law in December, provided for two separate home rule parliaments. One parliament for southern Ireland, and one for the six counties that would become Northern Ireland.<sup>9</sup> Donegal would be directly affected by this action as it would restrict the county's economic position, particularly its access to the important port of Derry, and cut it off from the rest of Ireland. The Rural District Councils were among the first to declare against partition. On 21 February 1920, Donegal Rural District Council copied a resolution of their counterparts in Monaghan and stated:

That we the members of R.D.C. Donegal the elected representatives of a population consisting entirely of Ulstermen emphatically as Irishmen protest against any scheme of severing our country and people from our fellow countrymen of the south & west.

7 Ozseker, *Forging the Border*, pp. 14-20.

8 Donegal County Archives, Inishowen Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/5/1/11, 18 April 1918, p. 20.

9 Paul Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its Origins 1886-1925* (Dublin, 2011), pp. 21-59; Moore, *Birth of the Border*, pp. 16-29.

We are Irishmen and inside Ireland we know but one nation inhabiting it.

We, as Ulstermen though proud of our province recognise no Ulster nation any more than we recognise a Munster nation. The division of a whole people at the bidding of a small minority of zealots and political wire-pullers is at once unnational and unnatural and we pledge ourselves and our constituents never to submit to it.<sup>10</sup>

Similar levels of opposition were felt in the Rural District Councils towards the Education Bill in 1919. The bill proposed the creation of a centralised department of education that would reform intermediate education, encourage poorer students to attend secondary education, and increase remuneration for teachers. The Catholic Church opposed the bill as they believed it would weaken their control over education. Nationalist politicians felt that the measures would undermine Irish culture in schools.<sup>11</sup> On 8 March 1920, Inishowen Rural District Council expressed their 'disapproval of the Education and Partition proposals contemplated to be imposed on our Country by the British Government' and hoped that they would be defeated 'in the same way as the application of conscription was defeated'.<sup>12</sup> The Education Bill was allowed to lapse but partition became a reality when the Government of Ireland Act brought Northern Ireland into existence in May 1921.

The likelihood of partition, coupled with the War of Independence and continued rise of Sinn Féin, caused popular opinion in Donegal to turn against the IPP. Some councillors sensed this and tried to prevent their imminent defeat in the local elections in June. On 10 May 1920, Inishowen councillors rescinded their previous resolution against the 1916 Rising that had condemned 'the actions of the Sinn Féin leaders

10 Donegal County Archives, Donegal Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/2/1/6, 21 February 1920, pp. 123-4.

11 Sean Farren, *The Politics of Irish Education 1920-1965* (Belfast, 1995), p. 24.

12 Donegal County Archives, Inishowen Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/5/1/11, 8 March 1920, p. 419.

in causing wanton destruction to life and property in Dublin'.<sup>13</sup> These gestures were futile as Sinn Féin became the largest party in Donegal's Rural District Councils after June 1920, but they found governing more difficult.

123

1029 M. / 1920 Letter from the local Government Board stating that Returning Officers should abstain from engaging the services of Pns. Offices Poll clerks or other Election Officers & from giving orders for Stationery, Ballot Boxes or other appliances for taking the Poll or counting of the Votes or incurring on behalf of the Local Authority any expenses in anticipation of or preparation for the Election pending further instructions which will be issued shortly.

Minute That we request the Local Government Board to adhere to Regulations 219. T. 20. M. / 1919 dated 1<sup>st</sup> Dec 1919

1074, 1073 / 1920 Letter from the local Government Board stating that pending further instructions Contractors be requested to suspend work on orders given and also refrain from incurring further expenditure as directed in the Board's Circular of 13<sup>th</sup> inst.

Resolution of Monaghan County Council passed that we the members R. D.C. Donegal the elected representatives of a population consisting entirely of Ulstermen emphatically as Irishmen protest against any scheme of severing our county and people from our fellow countrymen of the South & West.

We are Irishmen and inside Ireland we know but one nation inhabiting it.

We, as Ulstermen though proud of our province recognise no Ulster nation any more than we

Extract from Donegal RDC minutes of meeting of 21 February 1920  
(Donegal County Archives)

13 Donegal County Archives, Inishowen Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC5/1/11, 10 May 1920, p. 457.

## 4

### **Rural District Councils in Donegal, 1920-25: A Revolution in Local Government?**

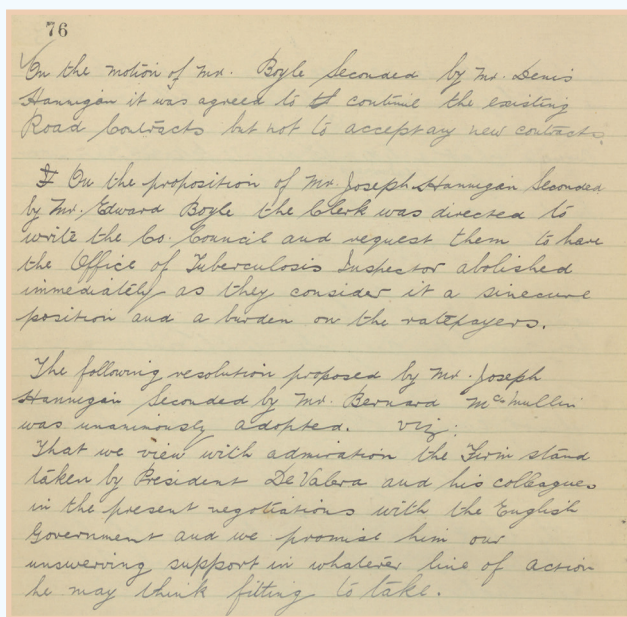
The local elections in June 1920 were an important moment in the Irish Revolution as Sinn Féin won 176 out of 206 Rural Districts nationally.<sup>1</sup> The party's control in Donegal was not absolute as some IPP and Unionist candidates retained their seats. Despite this, the rapidity with which Sinn Féin cemented their control over the councils, which was largely due to the success of the Dáil's Department of Local Government under the headship of W.T. Cosgrave, was a key factor that determined why popular opinion moved towards Irish independence. This was evident shortly after the June election when the councils, as mentioned in the previous essay, quickly passed resolutions acknowledging 'Dáil Éireann as the duly elected Government of the Irish people', along with motions to 'sever all connections with the English L[ocal] G[overnment] B[oard]'.<sup>2</sup> The Board responded by withholding funds from all councils that declared for Dáil Éireann unless they submitted their accounts for audit and acknowledged the authority of the Custom House.

Despite the symbolism that was associated with declaring allegiance to Dáil Éireann, in practical terms it deprived Donegal's local authorities of essential funds. In October 1921, the Chairman of the County Council stated that they had been deprived of £41,463 in the previous

- 1 Local Government Archivists and Record Managers, *Democracy and Change: The 1920 Local Elections in Ireland* (Dublin: Department of Planning, Housing and Local Government, 2020), pp. 36-42.
- 2 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Rural Council – Minutes, RDC/1/1/15, 19 June 1920, p. 15.



financial year.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the councils had to deal with an economic slump after the First World War, rising agricultural prices, and demands for wage increases. The Democratic Programme, or the declaration of social and economic principles passed by the Dáil on 21 January 1919, promised to look after the elderly, sick, and vulnerable. However, the practicalities of local government meant that cost-cutting soon became the top priority.<sup>4</sup> In September 1920, Donegal Rural District Council abolished its sheep dipping and cattle-shed inspections to save money.<sup>5</sup> Stranorlar Rural District Council followed suit in 1921 by demanding the abolition of the office of the tuberculosis inspector, claiming that the office was a 'burden to the ratepayers'.<sup>6</sup>



*Extract from Stranorlar RDC minutes of meeting of 3 October 1921*

(Donegal County Archives)

- 3 Donegal County Archives, Donegal County Council – Minutes, CC/1/1/79 (2), 18 October 1921, p. 19.
- 4 Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble*, pp. 214–28.
- 5 Donegal County Archives, Donegal Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/2/1/7, 18 September 1920, p. 1.
- 6 Donegal County Archives, Stranorlar Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/9/1/7, 3 October 1921, p. 6.

When council workers demanded pay increases, the Dáil's Ministry for Labour asked that the Rural District Councils set up 'arbitration boards' to settle wage disputes. The establishment of these boards was frequently deferred. The refusal of householders to pay rates was more serious, and instances increased from late 1920 as some ratepayers refused to acknowledge the Dáil's authority. In October 1921, the County Council reminded its collectors that any refusers in the districts should be brought before the Republican Courts which had been successfully established in the county.<sup>7</sup>

Some councils were more financially liable than others. Milford Rural District Council, as mentioned in the previous essay, had borrowed heavily from the Northern Bank to fund local infrastructure and, after June 1920, became dependent on direct payments from the County Council. By February 1921, Milford was so exposed by its debts that a special sitting was proposed to consider 'applying to the L[ocal] G[overnment] B[oard] to pay direct to Milford District Council ... and to rescind all resolutions previously passed recognising Dáil Éireann and to give a definite assurance to submit their accounts to audit'.<sup>8</sup> This motion came to nothing, but it demonstrates that there may have been some truth in the allegations of financial mismanagement which the revolutionary government associated with the Rural District Councils.

The Rural District Councils' financial instability was also demonstrated by their relationship with the Local Government Board after June 1920. Some Rural District Councils continued to maintain a relationship with the Board to secure money despite having declared allegiance to the Dáil. Ballyshannon Rural District Council did not renounce the Local Government Board until October 1920.<sup>9</sup> In March 1921, due to the increased financial distress that all Rural District Councils were

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7 Donegal County Archives, Donegal County Council – Minutes, CC/1/1/79 (2), 18 October 1921, p. 16.

8 Donegal County Archives, Milford Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/7/1/23, 12 February 1921, p. 32.

9 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/1/1/15, 9 October 1920, p. 75.

experiencing, the Board issued a circular letter empowering Ireland's local authorities to borrow money to provide services. Donegal Rural District Council considered the proposal, but ultimately took no action under it.<sup>10</sup> These attempts to balance revolutionary aspirations with the actual practicalities of governance were a common feature across Donegal during this period and, as shall be demonstrated later, were also important to the operation of the Urban District Councils and the Boards of Guardians. However, some Rural District Councils took a more direct approach to emphasise their support for the Dáil's Department of Local Government. In the Stranorlar Rural District Council minute book for March 1922 the word 'Board' was scored out in the minutes and 'Department' inserted in its place.<sup>11</sup> However, the extent of financial mismanagement in the Rural District Councils was a significant factor in the decision to abolish them in 1925.

As the War of Independence entered its most intense phase in late 1920 the Rural District Councils became more vocal in condemning British policy in Ireland. On 30 October 1920, Dunfanaghy Rural District Council sent its sympathies to the family of Terence MacSwiney, the Lord Mayor of Cork who had died on hunger strike in Brixton Prison earlier that month. Furthermore, the Council emphasised the hypocrisy of the British, considering that the 'so-called champions of the liberties of small nations tortured the Lord Mayor ... for the mere crime in the Englishman's eyes of loving his native country'.<sup>12</sup> Ballyshannon Rural District Council made a similar declaration on 13 November 1920. The councillors also expressed sympathy at the death of Kevin Barry, the eighteen year old Volunteer and student who was executed on 1 November for his involvement in a raid against British forces in Dublin.<sup>13</sup> The Council hoped that the families of

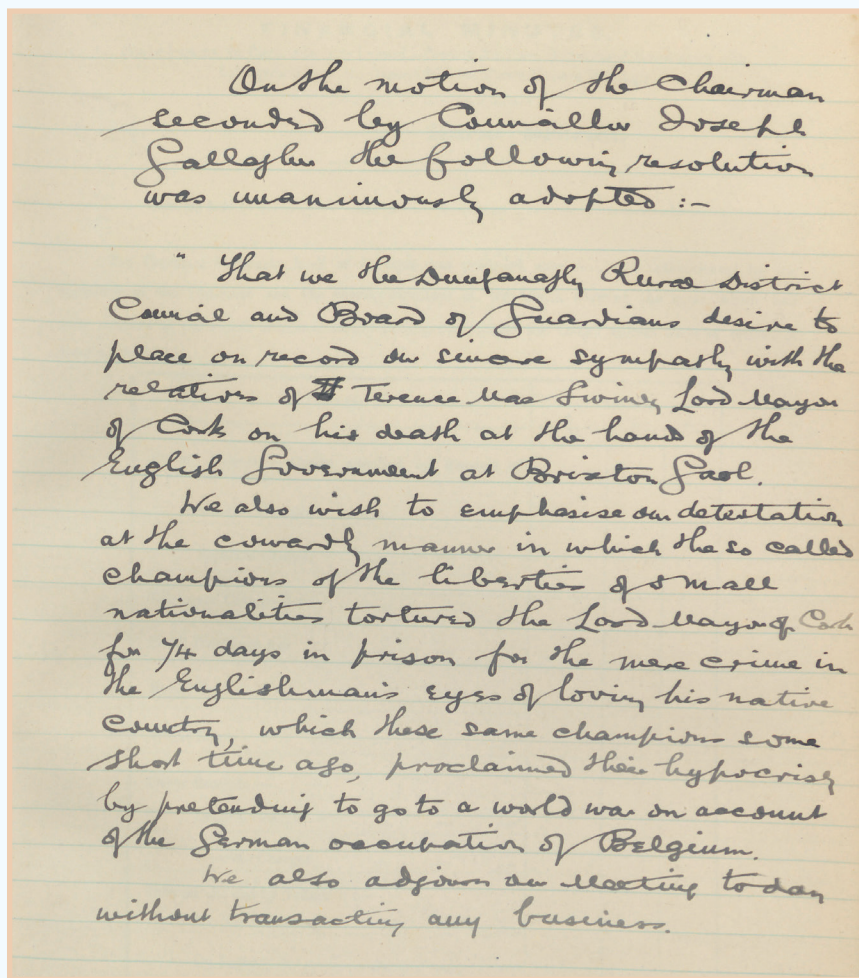
10 Donegal County Archives, Donegal Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/2/1/7, 19 March 1921, p. 84.

11 Donegal County Archives, Stranorlar Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/9/1/7, 6 March 1922, p. 121.

12 Donegal County Archives, Dunfanaghy Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/3/1/13, 30 October 1920, p. 69.

13 Charles Townshend, *The British Campaign in Ireland 1919-1921: The Development of Political and Military Policies* (Oxford, 1975), p. 67.

MacSwiney and Barry 'are satisfied in making the sacrifice willingly in the noble cause of Irish freedom'.<sup>14</sup>



On the motion of the Chairman seconded by Councillor Joseph Gallagher the following resolution was unanimously adopted :-

" That we the Dunfanaghy Rural District Council and Board of Guardians desire to place on record our sincere sympathy with the relations of ~~the~~ Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork on his death at the hands of the English Government at Brixton Jail.

We also wish to emphasise our detestation at the cowardly manner in which these so called champions of the liberties of small nationalities tortured the Lord Mayor of Cork for 74 days in prison for the mere crime in the Englishman's eyes of loving his native country, which these same champions some short time ago, proclaimed their hypocrisy by pretending to go to a world war on account of the German occupation of Belgium.

We also adjourn our meeting today without transacting any business.

Dunfanaghy Rural RDC resolution, 20 October 1920, following the death of the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney on hunger strike in prison  
(Donegal County Archives)

14 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/1/1/15, 13 November 1920, p. 86.

Donegal's Rural District Councils also responded to the damages that were caused during the most intense phase of the conflict. Although military activity in Donegal, as discussed earlier, was not as intense as elsewhere in Ireland there was a marked surge in localised violence. Rural District Councils became inundated with claims for 'malicious injury' from individuals or organisations that had been targeted by the Volunteers. Claims for compensation varied across the county. Frequent and larger claims were made to Rural District Councils which had experienced more Volunteer activity. South Donegal, where the No. 4 Brigade operated, saw extensive claims submitted to the Donegal and Ballyshannon Rural District Councils. On 11 July 1920, the R.I.C. demanded compensation from Donegal Rural District Council to cover criminal injuries that were committed against Pettigo barracks.<sup>15</sup> Similarly on 11 September 1920, the Inspector-General of the R.I.C. submitted a claim of £2500 to compensate for the barracks at Ballintra being burnt down. The Postmaster General also submitted a claim for £145 to compensate for the cutting of telegraph poles and wires in the area.<sup>16</sup> Less detailed claims were submitted to the other Rural District Councils throughout 1920 and 1921. In most instances when a council received a claim 'No action taken' was entered into the minute book. The council's solicitor was instructed to oppose the claim if it came before a court. These malicious injury claims reflect both the localised nature of the revolutionary violence that occurred in Donegal and demonstrates how British authority was gradually eroded in the county.

Further evidence of how the Rural District Councils contributed to the erosion of British authority is evidenced from the enthusiastic support the councils gave to the 'Belfast Boycott'. This was decreed by the Dáil in August 1920 in response to the violent sectarian attacks that were launched against Roman Catholics in Belfast. Under the

15 Donegal County Archives, Donegal Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/2/1/7, 11 July 1920, p. 224.

16 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Rural District Council– Minutes, RDC/1/1/15, 11 September 1920, p. 62; Ozseker, *Forging the Border*, pp. 114-122.

boycott, any person or company who traded with a business that openly discriminated against Catholics was liable to be fined or have their goods confiscated by the Volunteers. Ballyshannon Rural District Council wholeheartedly endorsed the boycott on 11 September, and it was likely that this decision provided further legitimatisation for its extensive implementation by the No. 4 Brigade.<sup>17</sup> Joseph Murray, in his statement to the Bureau of Military History, noted how he and the Bundoran Company had raided shops in the town in April 1921 that stocked prohibited ‘Belfast goods’.<sup>18</sup> Despite the hostile attitudes that the councils showed towards British authority they did show a degree of latitude to the R.I.C., perhaps because most of its recruits were Irish.

P/183/3/42 B Co 1st Bt St Donegal Brigade 25  
 Report for APRIL 1921  
 strength of Co - - - - 40  
 No. of meetings - - - - 2  
 No of general Parades none  
 Acting on instructions from  
 Bge. dismantled Donegal  
 Vindicator printing machinery  
 for hindering Belfast Boycott.  
 Machinery repaired soon after.  
 Enemy Military & Police carry on as last month  
 Adjutant

*Report from 1st Battalion, ‘South Donegal Brigade’ for April 1921, on various issues including the Belfast boycott (Joseph Murray Papers)  
 (Donegal County Archives)*

17 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Rural District Council– Minutes, RDC/1/1/15, 11 September 1920, p. 63.

18 Military Archives, Bureau of Military History, WS 1566, p. 14.

Dunfanaghy Rural District Council was instructed by the Dáil's Department for Labour to 'do their utmost for any member of the R.I.C. who had resigned from their force on account of loyalty to Ireland'.<sup>19</sup>

Rural District Councils continued to operate following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty on 6 December 1921 and after the outbreak of the Civil War in June 1922. However, the actual and alleged financial misconduct that occurred within these bodies in Donegal and across Ireland ensured that the new Irish Free State that came into existence on 6 December 1922 would look negatively on them. By early 1924 the Cumann na nGaedheal government headed by W.T. Cosgrave decided to abolish the Rural District Councils. There was a hostile reaction to this plan in Donegal. In February 1924, Stranorlar Rural District Council issued a resolution that offered six reasons to oppose the abolition of the councils. First, it had taken years to get Westminster to establish the councils. Second, the councils gave people a voice in local government. Third, the abolition of the councils would remove local consent from public expenditure. Fourth, the Irish Free State was founded on the 'self-determination of small nations' and 'this principle should be applied to local as well as national Government'. Fifth, abolition would weaken labour representation since not all working people could afford to travel to Lifford, the county town, to settle their grievances. Finally, a commission should be appointed to take evidence from every county before a decision on abolition was made.<sup>20</sup> These arguments were deemed ineffective and Ireland's Rural District Councils were abolished under the Local Government Act on 1 March 1925.

The Rural District Councils of Donegal only existed for about twenty-five years, but they helped to expand political engagement in the county. The minutes of each meeting reveal communities that took an

19 Donegal County Archives, Dunfanaghy Rural District Council – Minutes, RDC/3/1/13, 11 September 1920, p. 25.

20 Donegal County Archives, Stranorlar Rural District Council– Minutes, RDC/9/1/7, 4 February 1924, p. 324.

intense interest in local and national affairs and, like today, negotiated the practicalities of local government. The local elections of June 1920 were crucial in the political transformation of Donegal and, considering the continued presence of IPP and Unionist councillors, the county provides a unique example of political pluralism that can also be seen in the Urban District Councils and the Boards of Guardians.

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The following resolution was proposed by the Chairman  
seconded by <sup>Mr. Benjamin McQuillan</sup> ~~Captain Dugan~~ and unanimously adopted.  
:- That we the Stranorlar Rural District Council  
protest against the proposal to abolish Rural District  
Councils for the following reasons  
(1) It took years of agitation against the British  
Government to establish the Rural District Councils  
(2) The Rural District Councils are the only medium of  
affording to the people any voice in local ~~in local~~  
administration.  
(3) If the Councils are abolished the people will have no  
voice in the expenditure of local funds nor will they  
have any means of expressing their approval or  
disapproval of any public affairs.  
(4) We hold that the <sup>accepted</sup> principle upon which the Irish Free  
State was conceded was "the self determination of small  
"nations" and this principle should be applied to  
local as well as national Government.

Stranorlar RDC Resolution concerning the abolition of Rural District Councils,

4 February 1924

(Donegal County Archives)



## 5

### **Urban District Councils in Donegal, 1919-1925: The Revolution in the Towns**

On 31 May 1920, Ballyshannon's Town Commissioners followed their declaration of allegiance to Dáil Éireann with a decision to rename some of the town's streets to match the republicanism of the revolutionary state. The commissioners proposed that 'Back Street' be renamed 'Tyrconnell Street', and that 'Bachelors Walk' be renamed 'Pearse Street'. Furthermore, the names of each street were to be 'affixed in a conspicuous place ... and that the names be in the Irish language'.<sup>1</sup> This action was a distinct example of revolutionary fervour in Donegal's Urban District Councils. However, as we have seen elsewhere, the revolution impacted on the provision of services. After the local elections to the Urban District Councils in January 1920, councillors were forced to balance their revolutionary aspirations against the practical needs of government. Two points will be focused on in this essay to demonstrate this pragmatism. First, the essay will briefly provide some background to the Urban District Councils and the services that they provided. It will also address how the councils operated before the local elections in January 1920. Second, the essay will examine how the new Sinn Féin councillors responded to the conflicting demands of the revolution and the need to provide basic services in the towns.

Urban District Councils were established under the Local Government (Ireland) Act in 1898 to provide local government to towns with

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1 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Town Commissioners – Minutes, BTC/1/1, 31 May 1920, p. 562.

substantial populations.<sup>2</sup> By 1919 there were four such towns in Donegal. Letterkenny, Buncrana, and Bundoran were administered by Urban District Councils that were elected by all eligible voters in the towns and were funded through rates. Ballyshannon, by contrast, was administered by an elected Town Commission that operated in the same way as an Urban District Council. The councils monitored public health, leased social housing, and provided lighting, water, sewage, and gas services to the towns. Most of these services mirrored those that were provided by the Rural District Councils. However, the concentrated populations within these towns meant that public health, and the provision of water and lighting services, dominated the meetings of the Urban District Councils.

Before the elections in January 1920, most of the Urban District Councils were keen to expand lighting and water services. In November 1919, the members of Letterkenny Urban District Council wanted to acquire Lough Gartan in the north of the county as another reservoir for the town at a cost of £7,800.<sup>3</sup> The council also applied to the Local Government Board for £10,000 to build a gas-powered electricity station at Letterkenny's Market Square to extend power to the Donegal District Lunatic Asylum and other parts of the district.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Ballyshannon's Town Commissioners estimated that it would cost £90 per year to provide electric street lighting even with the lights being turned off after 11:30 pm and during full moons.<sup>5</sup>

The sponsoring of large infrastructure projects ceased after the local elections in January 1920. Despite Sinn Féin's success, the introduction of proportional representation meant that a substantial number of IPP, Unionist, Labour, and independent councillors were elected.<sup>6</sup>

2 Porter, *The Municipal Revolution*, ch. 6.

3 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/1/1/5, 17 November 1919, p. 495.

4 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/1/1/5, 18 November 1919, p. 497.

5 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Town Commissioners – Minutes, BTC/1/1, 8 September 1919, p. 533.

6 Local Government Archivists and Record Managers, *Democracy and Change*, pp. 27-33.

No. 59,279.  
1914.



The Local Government Board for Ireland.

**TOWN OF BUNDORAN.**

WHEREAS by section seven of the Public Health (Ireland) Act, 1878 (in this Order referred to as "the Act of 1878") as adapted by Article thirty-two of the Local Government (Adaptation of Irish Enactments) Order, 1899, the Local Government Board for Ireland (in this Order referred to as "the Local Government Board") are empowered by provisional order to separate from a rural sanitary district any town or district wholly situate therein, in which there are town or township commissioners under any Act of Parliament, whether the number of the inhabitants of such town or district is more or less than six thousand, and to constitute it an urban sanitary district, to be thereafter subject to all the provisions of the Act of 1878, as amended by the provisions of the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898 (in this Order referred to as "the Act of 1898,")  
41 & 42 Vict. c. 52.  
61 & 62 Vict. c. 37.

AND WHEREAS it is further enacted by the said section seven of the Act of 1878 that no such provisional order shall be made except on petition from one or other of the towns, townships, or districts affected by such order, nor in the event of any objection being taken by any person affected thereby until after due local inquiry :

AND WHEREAS by sub-section (1) of section forty-two of the Act of 1898 it is enacted in effect that where a town has a population exceeding one thousand five hundred according to the last published census for the time being, but is not an urban sanitary district, any order of the Local Government Board constituting such town an urban sanitary district shall, unless within three months after the order is published the Board receive a petition against it from at least one-fourth of the local government electors within the town or from the guardians of the union, or council of the rural district, comprising the town or any part thereof, take effect without the authority of Parliament ; and that a certificate of the Board that no such petition has been received, and that the order has taken effect, shall be conclusive evidence of those facts :

AND WHEREAS it is enacted by section one of the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1900, that if a petition in pursuance of sub-section (1) of section forty-two of the Act of 1898 against an order of the Local Government Board is withdrawn before the date fixed in that behalf in the order, the said sub-section shall have effect in like manner as if the petition had not been received :  
63 & 64 Vict. c. 63.

*B. C.*

*Bundoran becomes an Urban District Council, 1914*

(Donegal County Archives)

Furthermore, the aspirations of the Democratic Programme, as we have seen elsewhere, were quickly abandoned once the councils were deprived of Local Government Board funds. The need to restrict spending was made apparent to the new Letterkenny Urban District Council on 1 March when the councillors considered reports from their finance committee. Highlighting the need to restrict spending, the report criticised ‘the burning of public lamps’ all night and proposed the ‘stoppage of nightwork’ in the town’s gasworks to save money. The council delayed the committee’s report, but the need to save money was behind their decision on that day to ‘defer any further consideration of the Housing Scheme until the Government increases the subsidy’.<sup>7</sup>

The drive to save money in Letterkenny was often hampered by the town’s faulty water supply system. Council meetings were frequently taken up discussing the inadequate supply and the cost to maintain the town’s existing reservoirs at Lough Salt and behind the mental hospital. By early 1921 the cost to the system led the council to apply to the Local Government Board, despite an earlier resolution that renounced this institution, for a loan to fund the installation of water meters in the town. In June 1921, the Office of Public Works denied the loan and it is likely that this was behind the council’s decision to impose strict water controls the following month. These restrictions included a ban on washing cars and running taps, and a request that baths be taken ‘as little as possible’.<sup>8</sup>

The inability to improve services in Donegal’s Urban Districts was compounded by a decline in the rates that the councils received. In February 1920, Ballyshannon’s Town Commissioners were informed that they possessed inadequate rates to pay for the local elections, street cleaning, and public lighting.<sup>9</sup> The reports that Letterkenny Urban

7 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/1/1/5, 1 March 1920, pp. 525-43.

8 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/1/1/5, 6 June – 4 July 1921, pp. 716-26.

9 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Town Commissioners – Minutes, BTC/1/1, 3 February 1920, p. 547.

District Council received from its finance committee in early 1920, mentioned above, also stressed the ‘backward state of the collection of rates’.<sup>10</sup> Councils, as discussed in an earlier essay, frequently responded to this by ordering their rate collectors to bring those who refused to pay before a republican court.

The financial insecurities within the councils led to some creative ways to bring in money. In August 1920, Ballyshannon Town Commissioners increased the rate to one shilling in the pound for businesses, and three pence in the pound on all households.<sup>11</sup> Rate increases meant nothing if people still refused to pay. By August 1922 Buncrana Urban District Council reported that it was still owed £312-7-6 in uncollected rates. Furthermore, the decline of the republican courts after the truce in July 1921 meant that there was ‘practically no court in the Parish’ that could enforce the council’s authority.<sup>12</sup> Bundoran Urban District Council tried to solve this by convening a special meeting to debate rate payments in June 1922. Councillors were divided over how to proceed, and one member even argued that people refused to pay because the council had ‘no authority to compel payment of rates’.<sup>13</sup>

In some instances, the need to acquire money forced some Urban District Councils, like their counterparts in the Rural Districts, to reconsider their relationship with the Local Government Board. On 12 January 1921, Buncrana Urban District Council debated a motion to rescind its previous resolution against the Local Government Board, submit its account books to the Custom House for audit, and ensure ‘that the Orders of the Local Government Board be carried out as heretofore’. Sinn Féin councillors, in an amendment to this motion, argued that the council should continue to oppose the Board. The

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10 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny Urban District Council, Minutes, UDC/1/1/5, 1 March 1920, p. 526.

11 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Town Commissioners – Minutes, BTC/1/1, 3 August 1920, p. 569.

12 Donegal County Archives, Buncrana Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/2/1/3 (1), 7 August 1922, [not paginated].

13 Donegal County Archives, Bundoran Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/3/1/4, 8 June 1922, p. 317.

resulting vote ended in a tie as four councillors from both sides backed the motion and the amendment. To break the tie, the Chairman used his casting vote to decide in favour of the motion.<sup>14</sup> The Council subsequently resolved to conform to the Local Government Board's authority at its meeting on 7 March.<sup>15</sup>

The following letters were read from the Local Government Board.  
Letter No 3940/1921 dated the 14<sup>th</sup> February 1921 acknowledging receipt of letter of the 8<sup>th</sup> Feb and requesting to be furnished with a copy of the resolution of the Council directing the resumption of relations with the Board and also the Bond of the Rate Collector for the Board Inspection  
Proposed by Mr Patrick Porter  
Seconded by Mr Robert S<sup>r</sup> Parke jr  
That the Council conform to the rules orders and regulations of the Local Government Board as heretofore and that the Minutes be sent and accounts submitted to the Local Government Audit and that the Rate Collectors Bond be forwarded for the Board inspection  
passed

Extract from the minutes of meeting of Buncrana UDC, 7 March 1921  
(Donegal County Archives)

Bundoran Urban District Council may have also engaged in a similar practice. On 2 August 1921, councillors in Bundoran considered a letter from the Dáil's Department of Local Government that accused the council of reengaging with the Local Government Board after a meeting on 6 December 1920. The Chairman explained that the

14 Donegal County Archives, Buncrana Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/2/1/3 (1), 12 January 1921, [not paginated].

15 Donegal County Archives, Buncrana Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/2/1/3 (1), 1 March 1921, [not paginated].

council's decision to have the Board audit its account books was done 'solely in the interests of the Ratepayers' and the books only covered the period before the council's decision to renounce the Board.<sup>16</sup> No further information was included to support this claim, and the absence of minutes for 1920 means we are unable to verify it.

The optimism that followed the truce in July 1921 was likely behind Buncrana Urban District Council's decision on 3 October to 'rescind all previous resolutions and declarations authorising the recognition of the English Local Government Board' and to adhere to the Department of Local Government once again. To support this new resolution, the councillors asked that the Department send a local government inspector to the town to 'enquire into the working of the Council for the past twelve months'.<sup>17</sup>

The military upheaval caused by the War of Independence and the Civil War also impacted on the services that these towns provided. Letterkenny Courthouse, where the Urban District Council frequently convened, was occupied by Crown forces on 9 August 1920 and the councillors were forced to meet at the nearby Loan Fund office.<sup>18</sup>

The Gas Manager for Letterkenny also reported to the council on that day that he needed a 'further supply of Coal as prospects don't look pleasant owing to the unsettled state of affairs'.<sup>19</sup> The Lough Swilly Railway, which carried most of the coal imports into Letterkenny from the port of Derry, was a daily target for the Volunteers and supplies to the town were frequently disrupted.<sup>20</sup> Bundoran Urban District Council, owing to its close proximity to Finner Camp, frequently complained of the 'increasingly heavy motor traffic, especially military

16 Donegal County Archives, Bundoran Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/3/1/4, 2 August 1921, p. 53.

17 Donegal County Archives, Buncrana Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/2/1/3 (1), 3 October 1921, [not paginated].

18 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/1/1/5, 9 and 12 August 1920, pp. 598 - 600.

19 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/1/1/5, 12 August 1920, p. 609.

20 Ozseker, *Forging the Border*, pp. 8-9.

LETTERKENNY UNION.  
RURAL DISTRICT COUNCIL.

MINUTES of the proceedings of the Rural District Council, at a Meeting held on FRIDAY, the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of December 1920

PRESENT—In the Chair.....

*Mr Neal Kelly J.P.*

Other Members :-

Allison, Henry James	Reilly, Neal	M'Donagh, Thomas	Roulston, Robert
Bresland, Wm.	Lucey, John Thompson J.P.	M'Kelvey, Francis	Sweeney, James E.
Crossan, Thomas	Lee, John, Junr	M'Kinney, W. G. J.P.	Ward, John
<del>.....</del>	Lynch, Edward, J.P.	Mullan, John	Ward, William
<del>.....</del>	M'Greora, James	Reid, John William	Total—19

The Minutes of last Meeting were read and signed

The Book was signed by the Chairman.

The Clerk submitted the following Report :-

*Mr Neal Kelly (Chairman) addressed the Council in Irish which he said was proposing the Motion in his name severing connection with the English Local Government Board and asked was there any one to second the Motion in Irish - There was no seconder in Irish -*

*He then proposed in English that the English Local Govt Board be not further recognised, and that only Dail Eireann be recognised seconded by Mr Greora.*

*Mr S. Lynch J.P. proposed as an amendment that consideration of same be deferred for three months seconded by Mr Robert Roulston -*

*On a vote being taken the motion was declared (by 6 votes to three for the amendment) to be carried -*

Extract from Letterkenny UDC Minutes of meeting of 3 December 1920 (Donegal County Archives)



lorries'.<sup>21</sup> Buncrana Urban District faced a similar problem in August 1922. Fort Dunree, outside Buncrana, still contained Crown forces as part of the agreement to allow Britain to retain Lough Swilly as a 'Treaty Port' under the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The Council Clerk was instructed to write to the O/C of the fort to ensure 'his company travel at a more reasonable speed passing through the town'.<sup>22</sup>

Urban District Councils survived the reforms that were launched by the Cosgrave Government and were not abolished, unlike the Rural District Councils, under the Local Government Act in 1925. The high population numbers in the Urban Districts played a key part in their retention and the councils survived until their eventual abolition under the Local Government Reform Act in 2014. Although many of the issues that the Urban District Councils faced mirrored those of their Rural counterparts, the revolution had a profound impact on Donegal's towns. Not every Urban District Council was as enthusiastic as Ballyshannon when it came to renaming streets, but the revolution impacted on the basic services that the councils provided. Water, gas, and electricity were essential to the concentrated populations in these urban centres and the extension of these services became a common platform that all parties pursued after independence in 1922.

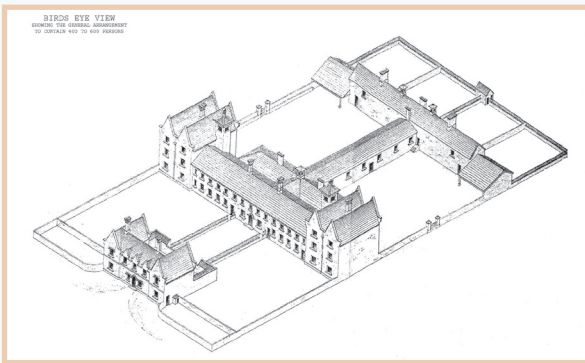
21 Donegal County Archives, Bundoran Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/3/1/4, 7 November 1921, p. 85.

22 Donegal County Archives, Buncrana Urban District Council – Minutes, UDC/2/1/3 (1), 7 August 1922, [not paginated].

## 6

### Poor Law Reform and Healthcare Provision in Revolutionary Donegal, 1919-1923

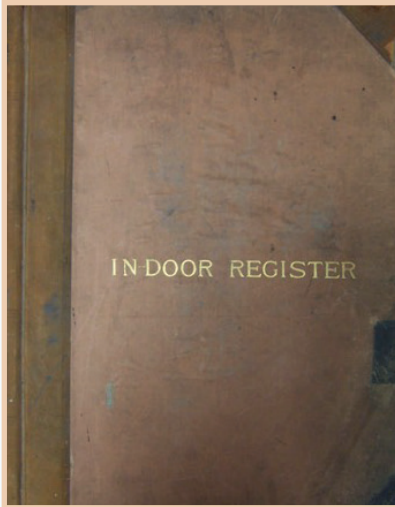
The Democratic Programme, or the declaration of social and economic principles that was issued by the first Dáil on 21 January 1919, emphasised the need to abolish the ‘present odious, degrading and foreign Poor Law System’. It proposed a ‘sympathetic native scheme’ that would ensure that the sick and elderly would be ‘entitled to the Nation’s gratitude and consideration’.<sup>1</sup> This statement was a marked contrast to the Poor Law that had existed in Ireland since the extension of the English system to the country in 1838. Under the Poor Law, Ireland was divided into over 130 Poor Law Unions that were administered by Boards of Guardians who were elected by local ratepayers. These Unions administered indoor or outdoor relief through the workhouses and were designed to make the destitute feel that they were a burden on society.<sup>2</sup>



*George Wilkinson's Plan  
of Irish Workhouses, Poor  
Law Commissioners  
Annual Report, 1839*  
(Donegal County Archives)

- 1 Dáil Éireann debate – Tuesday, 21 January 1919, vol. f, no. 1.
- 2 Peter Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law, 1815-43* (Manchester, 2009), chs. 6-9; Virginia Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland, 1850-1914* (Liverpool, 2013), chs. 1 & 2.

The services that the workhouses provided were expanded from the 1850s onwards with the creation of the dispensary system. Dispensaries provided medical services within the Unions through a district medical officer. After the opening of workhouse infirmaries to the public in 1862 these institutions gradually transitioned into healthcare facilities. Fever hospitals were also established in the workhouses to combat localised outbreaks. Poor Law Unions also fell under the oversight of the Local Government Board and grew dependent on grants to provide services. After 1898, as mentioned earlier, the public health functions of the Boards of Guardians were taken over by the Urban and Rural District Councils. Therefore, by 1919, workhouses had moved away from the cruel stereotypes of the nineteenth century and had become multi-purpose institutions that provided essential services to communities. In Donegal there were Poor Law Unions and workhouses in Letterkenny, Ballyshannon, Stranorlar, Dunfanaghy, Carndonagh, Donegal Town, Glenties, and Milford.



*Dunfanaghy Workhouse register,  
1891 – 1915*  
(Donegal County Archives)

Many of the health challenges that Donegal's Boards of Guardians faced mirrored those that are encountered today. In October 1919 the Local Government Board requested that Letterkenny Board of Guardians enforce the requirements of the Vaccination Acts, which had been passed during the previous century to prevent the spread of smallpox, and insisted that 'prosecutions should be instituted in all cases in which parents persist in failing to have children submitted to vaccination'.<sup>3</sup> From November 1919 the Guardians

3 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny Board of Guardians – Minutes, BG/109/1/76, 31 October 1919, p. 167.

of Ballyshannon engaged in lengthy negotiations with the St. Johns Ambulance charity in Belfast to procure an ambulance for the Union.<sup>4</sup> This ambulance, as discussed earlier, was subsequently commandeered by Joseph Murray and the Volunteers to attack Belleek R.I.C. barracks in September 1920.<sup>5</sup> The Guardians of Ballyshannon received an angry letter from the County Director of St. Johns Ambulance, after the ambulance was impounded in Finner Camp, asking for a guarantee that it not be used ‘contrary to the regulations for Restoration of Order in Ireland 1920’.<sup>6</sup>

By 1919, indoor relief, or the provision of relief within the workhouse had declined and Donegal’s workhouses contained only a handful of inmates. After nationalists assumed control of the Boards from the 1860s onwards there was a gradual shift to more outdoor relief through direct cash payments, or payments in lieu of work such as road construction. The provision of relief depended on the circumstances of each applicant. Despite Sinn Féin’s success in the elections to the Boards of Guardians in Donegal in June 1920, the Guardians of the revolutionary generation maintained an entrenched conservatism on the provision of welfare. Many within Sinn Féin continued to hold Victorian notions about the deserving and undeserving poor. In Donegal the deserving poor were the labourers and seasonal workers who were essential to prosperous farms to the east of the county. The undeserving poor, by contrast, were those whose poverty resulted from their own personal failings and inability to live up to social ideals.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the desire to reform the Poor Law, the revolutionary government still distinguished between ‘poverty’ and ‘destitution’ when determining who qualified for relief. The latter category was the one that guaranteed some form of welfare. In October 1920, Letterkenny’s

4 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Board of Guardians – Minutes, BG/38/1/85, 18 November 1919, p. 210.

5 Military Archives, Bureau of Military History, WS 1566, pp. 9-11; Ozseker, *Forging the Border*, p. 118.

6 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Board of Guardians – Minutes, BG/38/1/87, 22 January 1920, p. 149.

7 Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, ch. 1

Guardians denied David McAuley temporary lodgings in the workhouse because he had ‘an old age pension and is not destitute’.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in June 1921 the Guardians of Ballyshannon read a letter from Maggie Doherty who questioned why her outdoor relief had been stopped considering that she only earned 5 shillings a week and was ‘in very poor circumstances’.<sup>9</sup> The Guardians decided that no action be taken on Doherty’s case because her condition was not destitute.

Donegal’s Boards of Guardians, like their counterparts in the Rural and Urban District Councils, issued resolutions swearing allegiance to Dáil Éireann from June 1920 onwards. Some Guardians, such as the Guardians of Ballyshannon, undertook a strongly republican outlook from June onwards. James Connolly, the Volunteer Captain of the Kinlough Company in the No. 4 Brigade, was elected as a Guardian for Ballyshannon and was behind a successful resolution that banned soldiers and ex-soldiers from using the hospital.<sup>10</sup> The Guardians of Ballyshannon also relied on the Volunteers to implement their instructions. In July 1920 they asked the Volunteers to track down John McCurran so he could remove his wife and child from the workhouse.<sup>11</sup> The Guardians also passed a resolution in support of Connolly after his father was killed during an R.I.C. raid in September 1920.<sup>12</sup>

Although the Boards of Guardians in Donegal declared their allegiance to Dáil Éireann they were often, like their counterparts in the Rural and Urban District Councils, reluctant to shed all contact with the Local Government Board. The Guardians of Letterkenny were still sending their minutes to the Board in December 1920 and the Dáil sent a hostile letter, in line with a decree the previous September,

8 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny Board of Guardians – Minutes, BG/109/1/78, 1 October 1920, p. 43.

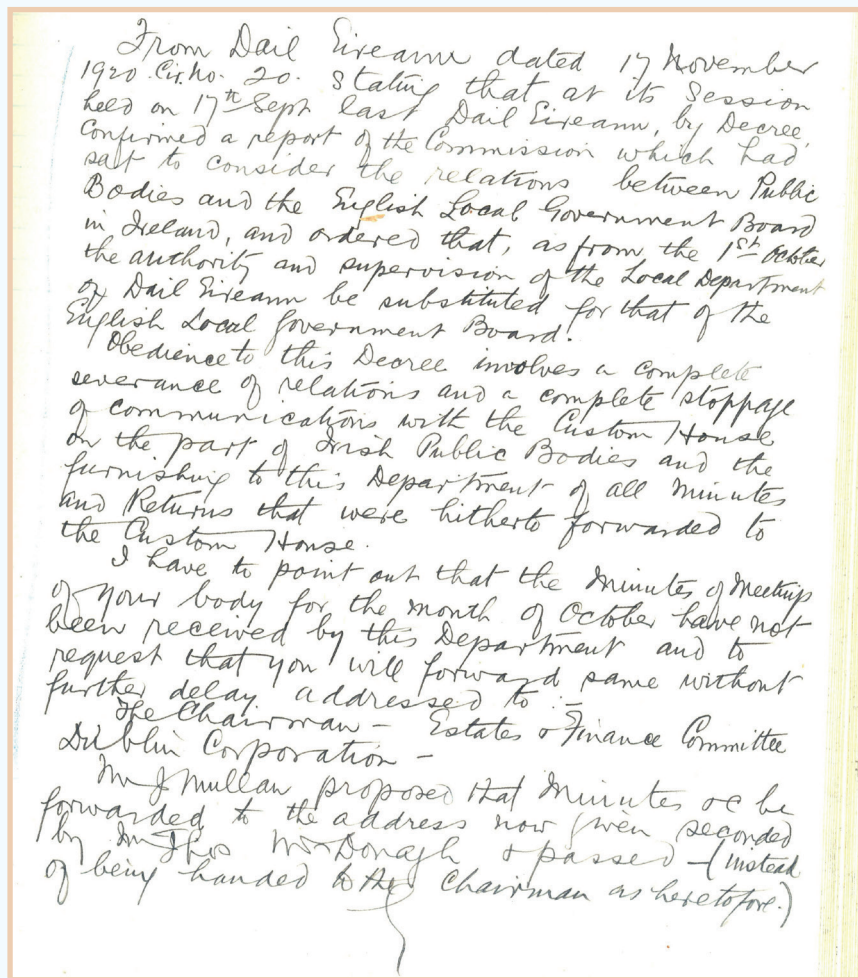
9 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Board of Guardians – Minutes, BG/38/1/87, 11 June 1921, p. 282.

10 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Board of Guardians – Minutes, BG/38/1/86, 19 June 1920, p. 262.

11 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Board of Guardians, - Minutes, BG/38/1/86, 24 July 1920, p. 294.

12 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Board of Guardians – Minutes, BG/38/1/87, 25 September 1920, p. 38; Ozseker, *Forging the Border*, p. 119.

threatening to withhold pensions from Guardians who continued to communicate with the Custom House.<sup>13</sup>



From Dail Eireann dated 17 November 1920. Cir. No. 20. Stating that at its Session held on 17<sup>th</sup> Sept last Dail Eireann, by Decree, confirmed a report of the Commission which had set to consider the relations between Public Bodies and the English Local Government Board in Ireland, and ordered that, as from the 1<sup>st</sup> October the authority and supervision of the Local Department of Dail Eireann be substituted for that of the English Local Government Board.

Obedience to this Decree involves a complete severance of relations and a complete stoppage of communications with the Custom House on the part of Irish Public Bodies and the furnishing to this Department of all minutes and Returns that were hitherto forwarded to the Custom House.

I have to point out that the minutes of meetings of your body for the month of October have not been received by this Department and to request that you will forward same without further delay addressed to:

The Chairman - Estates & Finance Committee  
Dublin Corporation -

Mr J. Mullan proposed that minutes be forwarded to the address now given (recorded by Mr J. W. Donagh & passed) (instead of being handed to the Chairman as heretofore.)

Extract from Letterkenny Board of Guardians Minutes of meeting, regarding its allegiance to  
Dáil Éireann, 3 December 1920  
(Donegal County Archives)

13 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny Board of Guardians – Minutes, BG/109/1/78, 3 December 1920, p. 234.

The Guardians subsequently resolved to sever communication with the Local Government Board, but the dangerous financial situation that the Union found itself in worried some of the remaining IPP members. On 25 February 1921, Edward Lynch, who was a local justice of the peace in Letterkenny, proposed that the town's Guardians rescind their allegiance to Dáil Éireann and return to the Local Government Board. This motion mirrored similar ones that were proposed to the Rural and Urban District Councils, and it also came to nothing. However, the fact that it was proposed further demonstrates both the divisions within the nationalist movements and those that were caused by the practicalities of local government.

These divisions were made more apparent when it came to the future of the workhouses. The Democratic Programme pledged the Irish Republic to improve the country's health but, as with its other pledges, it proved to be a vague aspiration rather than a certainty. The lack of money and the campaign against Crown forces ensured that there was no clear plan on how the Poor Law should be reformed. In July 1920 representatives from Donegal's Boards of Guardians convened at Lifford Courthouse to discuss the workhouses. The attendees decided to abolish the county's workhouses and transfer all the remaining inmates into Letterkenny.<sup>14</sup> In late 1920 the Dáil's Commission of Inquiry into Local Government recommended that the workhouses be abolished and amalgamated. Boards of Guardians in each county were required to implement these schemes and amalgamation, along with the need to save money, became the main policy that was pursued on health.<sup>15</sup> By December Donegal County Council had taken over the amalgamation scheme. The Council decided to retain Letterkenny Workhouse, abolish the others, and transfer the cost of these institutions to a 'County at Large' charge. The Guardians of Letterkenny noted that the Council lacked the power to abolish the workhouses and argued

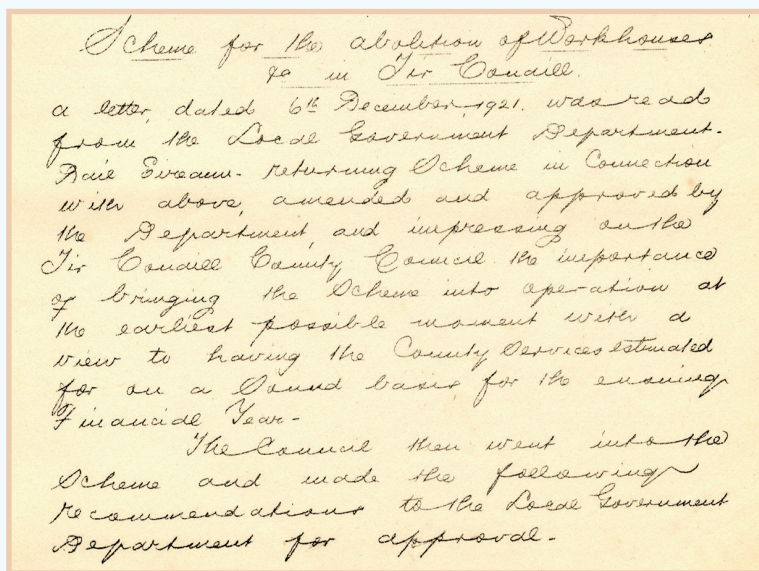
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14 This meeting is referenced in the Minutes of the Letterkenny, Ballyshannon, and Milford Boards of Guardians.

15 Donnacha Séan Lucey, *The End of the Irish Poor Law?: Welfare and Healthcare Reform in Revolutionary and Independent Ireland* (Manchester, 2015), p. 20.

that 'half of the Boards of Guardians of Unions situated wholly or partly in the County are opposed to the scheme'.<sup>16</sup>

These amalgamation schemes, as Donnacha Lucey has demonstrated, often provoked fierce local resistance from various Boards of Guardians who, despite their opposition to the idea of the 'workhouse', were reluctant to see their area deprived of welfare and medical services. This was the case for Ballyshannon's Guardians in November 1920 when they emphasised the 'peculiar situation of the Ballyshannon Workhouse' considering the area that it served extended into three counties. The Guardians rejected the proposed amalgamation because 'the time is not ripe for such a drastic change'.<sup>17</sup> Similar grievances were raised by the other Unions and many, such as Glenties and Letterkenny, deferred discussions on amalgamation for several months.



*Donegal County Council discusses the future of the county's workhouses, 21 June 1921*  
(Donegal County Archives)

16 Donegal County Archives, Letterkenny Board of Guardians – Minutes, BG/109/1/78, 24 December 1920, p. 305.

17 Donegal County Archives, Ballyshannon Board of Guardians – Minutes, BG/38/1/87, 6 November 1920, p. 102.



On 21 June 1921, the County Council debated the future of the workhouses. It was decided that all the inmates in the county's workhouses, except for Ballyshannon, would be transferred to Letterkenny which would henceforth be known as the 'County Home'. Owing to Ballyshannon's objections, the County Council decided to temporarily maintain the town's workhouse. With the recent Spanish Flu pandemic still fresh in their minds, the Council members also agreed to maintain fever hospitals, for the time being at least. Any Board of Guardians that refused to comply with the scheme would receive no money from the county fund.<sup>18</sup>

The Council's plan provoked a hostile reaction from the Inishowen Union that also touched on grievances dating back to the splitting of the peninsula into Inishowen and Londonderry No. 2 rural districts under the Local Government Act (1898). On 11 July 1921, Inishowen Board of Guardians resolved that the County Council were 'trying to throw dust in the eyes of our Ratepayers' by their:

Threat to completely cut us off this year's instalments unless we carry out an illegal order, viz., the closing down of our workhouse against the unanimous vote of the ratepayers of our Union, as it has been proven that the change suggested would be inconvenient & more expensive.<sup>19</sup>

Claiming a truer allegiance to Dáil Éireann than the County Council, the Inishowen Guardians refused to be 'compelled to amalgamate with a Union which has gone over to our enemy for the sake of a dole'.<sup>20</sup> By this the Guardians meant the portion of Londonderry Union that was now part of Northern Ireland. The objections of Inishowen came to nothing, but they reflect the intense negotiations between Lifford,

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18 Donegal County Archives, Donegal County Council – Minutes, CC/1/1/79 (1), 21 June 1921, [no pagination].

19 Donegal County Archives, Inishowen Board of Guardians – Minutes, BG/97/1/61, 11 July 1921, p. 186.

20 Donegal County Archives, Inishowen Board of Guardians – Minutes, BG/97/1/61, 11 July 1921, p. 187.

the wider county, and the revolutionary government in Dublin, on the future direction of healthcare provision in Donegal.

The County Council's plan was referred to the Dáil's Department of Local Government for consideration and it was estimated that it could save around £14,000 to £20,000 per year. The Local Government inspectors, who were appointed by the Department to visit run-down and remote workhouses, challenged the County Council's plans for healthcare reform across Ireland. The inspector stated that Letterkenny workhouse was unfit to be the county hospital and that Lifford Hospital should be the county hospital instead. Furthermore, the inspector recommended that a county home should be established at Stranorlar and that district hospitals should be maintained at Letterkenny, Donegal, Glenties, and Carndonagh.<sup>21</sup> By the time the Civil War broke out in June 1922 the situation had developed further. Between July and October, the Department of Local Government ordered the closure of Ballyshannon workhouse and the transfer of the town's healthcare services to the nearby Sheil Hospital, which was deemed to be a higher quality institution.<sup>22</sup> This situation remained unchanged until the 1960s when the district hospitals were closed, and Letterkenny General Hospital became the county hospital.

In conclusion, the winding-up of the Board of Guardians was one of the main consequences of the revolution in Donegal. Welfare and healthcare in the county were directly affected for generations by the decisions reached during this formative period. However, the minutes of the Board of Guardians show the latent conservatism within the wider Sinn Féin movement over Poor Law Reform, and the internal divisions within the nationalist movement over the workhouses. The abolition of the workhouses was the first major attempt to reform the Poor Law in Ireland and Britain and was innovative for its time considering that the structure remained in Northern Ireland until 1948. Despite

21 Donegal County Archives, Donegal County Council – Minutes, CC/1/1/79 (2), 15 November 1921, pp. 8-9.

22 Donegal County Archives, Donegal County Council – Minutes, CC/1/1/80 (2), 18 July 1922, p. 13; 24 October 1922, p. 18.

this, the divisions over amalgamation demonstrate that healthcare was a cherished issue in Donegal and that the revolutionary demand to abolish the idea of 'workhouses' conflicted with the practicalities of depriving communities of welfare and healthcare facilities.

Donegal  
20-2-22

Gentlemen.

As directed by you in notice terminating my appointment in the Service of the Donegal Union, I give hereunder particulars of my claim for Compensation for abolition of office. The following special circumstances should be taken into account in my case. I have 11 years service under Board of Guardians in the County and am entitled to ten years added service.

The total compensation I claim is:-

£58.. 16.. 0

Yrs Faithfully  
Sr M. Evangelist

Period of Service in Ballyshannon  
25<sup>th</sup> March from March 1911 -  
to Nov 1919 ✓  
In Donegal from 20 Oct 1919 to present date

Total number of yrs 11 add 10 = 21 yrs.

Letter from Sr Evangelist, former employee of Ballyshannon and Donegal workhouses regarding compensation claim, 20 February 1922

(Donegal County Archives)

## Further Reading

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## **Local Authority Publications and Educational Resources**

*From Conflict to Division, Donegal 1919 – 1925*, Donegal County Museum, Donegal County Council, 2021

*A Decade of Change: Donegal and Ireland, 1912 – 1923 Study Pack*, Donegal County Archives, Donegal County Council, 2012

*County Donegal in 1916: From the Edge, History and Heritage Pack*, Culture Division, Donegal County Council, 2016

*Democracy and Change: The 1920 Local Elections in Ireland*, Local Government Archivists and Records Managers, Department of Housing, Heritage & Local Government, 2020

*Donegal, the 1918 General Election and the First Dáil*, Donegal County Museum and Donegal County Archives, Donegal County Council, 2018.

The above publications are available online on [www.donegalcoco.ie](http://www.donegalcoco.ie)

## **Donegal County Council Archives & Museum Resources including exhibitions, education packs and presentations:**

<https://www.donegalcoco.ie/culture/countymuseum/>

<https://www.donegalcoco.ie/culture/archives/>

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=donegal+county+council+channel](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=donegal+county+council+channel)

## Digitised Archives

### Donegal County Archives

*Joseph Murray's Archive:*

<https://www.donegalcoco.ie/culture/archives/digitised%20archives%20on%20war%20of%20independence/>

*Archives of Rural and Urban District Councils*

<https://www.donegalcoco.ie/culture/archives/local%20authority%20archives%20digitised/>

*Echoes of the Decade Oral History project:*

<https://www.donegalcoco.ie/culture/archives/oral%20history/>

### Military Archives:

<https://www.militaryarchives.ie/en/digital-resources>

### Dáil Debates:

<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/find/>

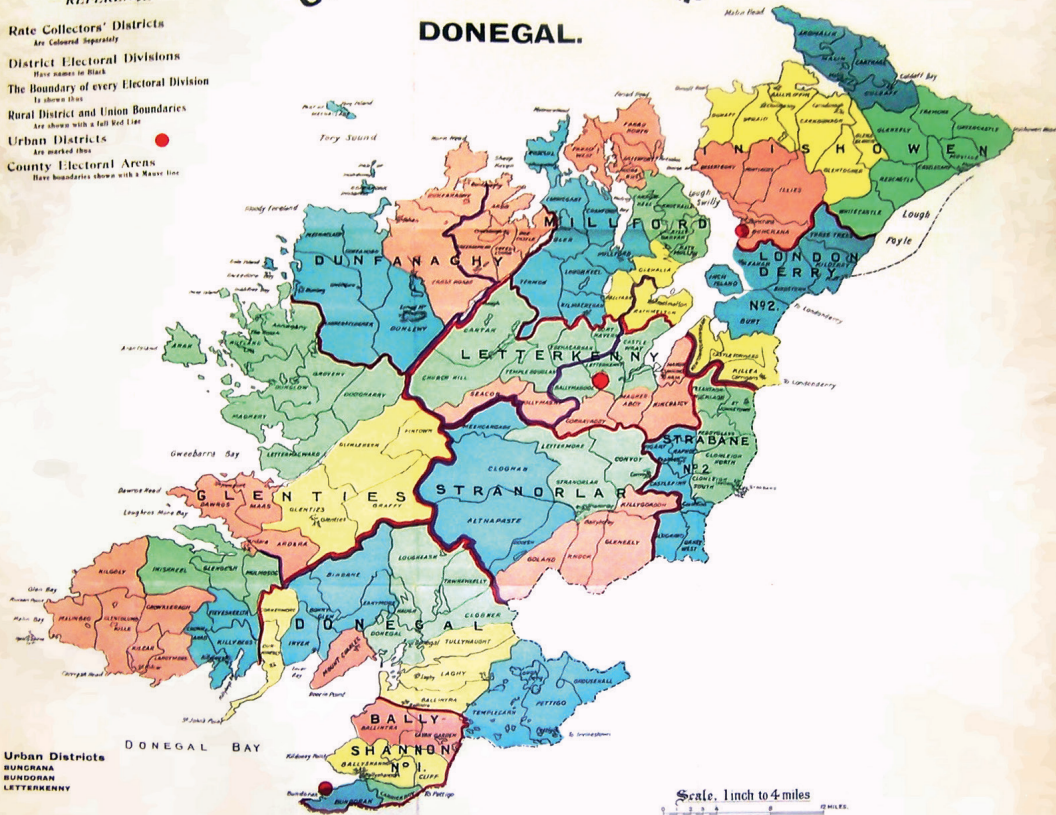
### Newspapers:

Derry Journal

# COUNTY COUNCIL MAP OF DONEGAL.

## REFERENCE

- Rate Collectors' Districts  
Are Coloured Separately
- District Electoral Divisions  
Have names in Black
- The Boundary of every Electoral Division  
Is shown in Blue
- Rural District and Union Boundaries  
Are shown with a full Red Line
- Urban Districts  
Are marked thus ●
- County Electoral Areas  
Have boundaries shown with a Meave Line



Urban Districts  
BUNRANA  
BUNDORAN  
LETTERKENNY

Scale 1 inch to 4 miles  
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 MILES.



**Comhairle Contae  
Dhún na nGall**  
Donegal County Council



An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir,  
Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán  
Department of Tourism, Culture,  
Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media