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'A constitutional island in a sea of Sinn Fein': *the account of Wilfrid Ewart of his walking from Cork to Belfast via Birr and Tullamore in 1921*

Michael Byrne

Wilfrid Ewart, *A Journey in Ireland 1921* (London, April 1922) was based on Ewart's account of his walk from Cork through the Irish midlands to Belfast during the War of Independence in April – May 1921. The book was published during the uneasy peace between the Treaty and the break out of hostilities in the civil war. Ewart (born 1892) commenced his journey on 18 April 1921 and finished it on 10 May. He states that he made every effort to talk to persons of all shades of political opinion. This must have been a virtual impossibility given that many people would have considered him to be an English spy and to be shunned. His visit took him from Cork to Northern Ireland via the Midlands and Dublin. It is his account of Birr and to a lesser extent Tullamore during the War of Independence that is reproduced here. Ewart tried, in his own mind, to be an impartial observer of the state of the country. In Birr, which was described as a 'constitutional island in a sea of Sinn Fein', he spoke to John Dooly who had been chairman of the King's County Council from 1912 to 1918 and also to the Birr parish priest, Archdeacon Ryan. He was surprised at how normal life was in Birr and contrasted the scene with the situation in Tullamore, where curfew had lately been imposed. On his walk to Tullamore he was accosted by the I.R.A. near Blue Ball, but allowed to proceed unharmed once his papers had been checked. He had been warned of the dangers of his walking tour and was perhaps lucky to escape without hurt.

An extract from his book was published in Glenn Hooper's *The Tourist's Gaze: travellers to Ireland, 1800 to 2000* (Cork, 2001). In his introduction at p. 183 Hooper states that Ewart was born in 1892 and died in 1922 – the year of the publication of his book, killed by a stray bullet in Mexico city on New Year's Eve 1922. So Ewart lived dangerously as is clear from his passage through County Offaly the year before his death.

In 2008 Ewart's book was reissued with a useful introduction by Paul Bew and Patrick Maume providing more biographical detail on Ewart and suggesting

that his visit to Ireland may have been inspired by a visit to Paris during Terence MacSwiney's hunger strike of 1920, when Ewart was surprised to discover the depth of feeling in France for the Irish cause. In making the trip Ewart was out to discover for himself just what justification there was (if any) for British actions in Ireland. Bew and Maume regard Ewart as a good interviewer but point out that he did not always grasp the full significance of his interviewees and drew attention to the case of the parish priest of Birr, Archdeacon Ryan. The editors quote Ryan as having described the police victims at Soloheadbeg in January 1919 as 'martyrs to the duty'. But the denunciation of Soloheadbeg came from Monsignor Arthur Ryan, P.P., V.G. of Tipperary and not John Ryan, parish priest of Birr. The confusion in the Ryans is not material in that the Soloheadbeg killings were widely condemned, including strong criticism by Archbishop Harty in Thurles Cathedral where the public were also invited to pray for the men 'who have this heavy crime on their consciences'.¹ (Many I.R.A. men who killed or maimed in the war did suffer later as is now emerging from the Bureau of Military History Pension files.)

Archdeacon John Ryan, the parish priest of Birr, was born in 1852, just four years after the Famine, at Glencullen near Nenagh and was ordained in 1878. He succeeded to Birr in 1917 on the death of Dean Scanlan in December 1916 and was parish priest there for thirty-one years until his death at the age of ninety-six in 1948. The *Midland Tribune* noted that every Birr parishioner who was physically capable attended the obsequies of their parish priest and put the funeral attendance at 6,000.² Ewart in his 1921 interview with Ryan described him as:

One of the most picturesque personalities I came across in this part of Ireland was Archdeacon Ryan, of Birr. Indeed, there was not a little in common between this fragile-looking, shy-mannered and unworldly priest and the steel-fibred leaders of Sinn Fein whom I had talked with in Cork. There was the same – how shall one say? – delicate adjustment of mind, softness of voice and manner, strain of poetry, faint perfume of idealism which mollifies, or appears to, the rigid nationalism.

Ewart went on to note that Archdeacon Ryan considered the I.R.A. to be motivated by pure patriotism. However, just two weeks after Ewart's interview with Archdeacon Ryan the Kinnitty ambush took place in which two constables (of a group of seven cycling policemen) serving summonses for jury duty were killed and two more injured while engaged in what Ryan saw as a harmless and not meddlesome duty. He went on to declare to his parishioners that thankfully Birr and the surrounding districts had been up to that point spared the troubles, the terrors, the bloodshed prevailing in parts of the country. People were justified, he said, in asserting their civil rights, but only within the law of God.³ The *Midland*

1 *Irish Independent*, 27 Jan. 1919.

2 *Midland Tribune*, 28 Feb. 1948.

3 See the Paul Bew and Patrick Maume introduction to Wilfrid Ewart, *A journey to Ireland 1921* (Dublin, 2008), pp xi–xxiii and citing *Midland Tribune*, 28 May 1921.

Tribune, under editor James Pike, was strongly pro-Sinn Féin and reported that the shops in Birr had been directed to close for the funeral but that few local people attended. The unionist *King's County Chronicle* reported the attendance of a large and representative gathering of the general public.⁴ Of the two constables who were killed John Dunne was serving in Birr and had joined the R.I.C. in 1918. Edward Doran, also killed, had joined in the same year.⁵

Patrick Fanning, a regular contributor of a history column to the *Midland Tribune* and later the *Offaly Independent* did in fact reproduce the Offaly section of the Ewart diary over a series of five articles in January and February 1953.⁶ Dean Ryan was dead no more than five years and Fanning did no more than paraphrase Ewart and add that Ryan was the most unworldly of priests and a sincere patriot. Of John Dooly, apart from reminding readers about his being chairman of the county council until 1918, Fanning paid tribute to his business acumen as the owner of a successful cabinet-making business at Wilmer Road, Birr; an auctioneer of national repute and a pioneer in road transport with his ownership of the Slieve Bloom Bus Company until it was acquired by the G.S.R. under the Road Transport Act. Dooly was accurately summarised as a nationalist of the old school.⁷

Ewart in his interview with John Dooly did focus on the immediate cause of Dooly's removal from the chair of the King's County Council in June 1918, but perhaps ought to have got a lot more. Here, one has to agree with Maume and Bew that much more could have been obtained from the interviewee. John Dooly had everything to do with the second wartime by-election in the county in 1918 and the general election of the same year. John Dooly's potential candidature for North King's County in April 1918, if there was any reality to it, was swept away in the conscription crisis of the same month. In June 1918 he lost his chairmanship of the county council that he had held since 1912 (seven to thirteen votes) because, it was said, of his participation in the Lloyd George-inspired Irish Convention and, in particular, his vote against the proposed Home Rule parliament having control of customs and excise. More likely he was removed because of his strong association with the Irish Parliamentary Part (I.P.P.) and recruitment.⁸ He had seen off the challenge to his council chairmanship in 1917. In common with others, including Patrick Egan in Tullamore (managing director of P. & H. Egan) and Toler Garvey in Birr (Lord Rosse's agent), he resigned the magistracy in July 1920.⁹ Whether it was a form of social protest or self-protection we do not know. When Sinn Féin members saw fit to resort to the 'British High Court' in Dublin to have

4 *King's County Chronicle*, 26 May 1921.

5 *Midland Tribune*, 8 Oct. 1921.

6 *Offaly Independent*, 31 Jan. 1953 – 21 Feb. 1953. Fanning died in January 1962: *Offaly Independent*, 13 Jan. 1962.

7 *Midland Tribune*, 31 Jan. 1953.

8 Michael Byrne. 'The by-elections in King's County/Offaly in 1914–18' in *Offaly Heritage* 9 (Tullamore, 2016), pp 19–87 and 80–81.

9 *Tullamore and King's County Independent*, 31 July 1920.

James Perry Goodbody and John Dooly excluded from the ballot for the 1920 county council elections on the grounds of technical defects in their lodged papers Dooly withdrew before the outcome of the hearing.¹⁰ Perhaps he need not have done so as the application against Goodbody failed, but then he may have feared for his personal safety. The I.R.A. in Clara knew that an attack on a Goodbody family member would mean the loss of 600 jobs in the mills and jute factory. The change in public mood in the county did not affect Dooly's standing in Birr and he continued to be elected as chair of the Birr Urban District Council up to his death in 1924, a record of twenty-four years.

On Dooly's death the *Midland Tribune* was kind enough to say that while it did not agree with all his views it deeply lamented his loss. He had been a Redmondite all his life and locally was at the forefront in promoting the National Volunteers, recruiting and attending as a county chairman at the ill-fated Irish Convention of 1917–18. Dooly was active in supporting the post-1900 public utilities for Birr including water and sewerage, and must have been alarmed at the loss of Birr's influence at county council level and the closure of its workhouse in 1921. As with many of the leading actors locally in the 1912–21 period their family associations were marked by a diversity which was not obvious on the public stage. The Adams, Egan and White families of Tullamore and Clara had family members who had fought in either the Boer or First World Wars while others were active in the national movement. One of Dooly's daughters was married to the leading Birr Sinn Féin solicitor, John J. Molloy, who was also one of the first district justices to be appointed by the Free State government in 1922.¹¹

Ewart met three other people perhaps including the agent to the Rosse estate. What was emphasised was how law abiding the town was. The county was at that time outside of the martial law area and the markets were functioning. In neither Birr nor Tullamore, (though described as hotter than Birr politically) did Sinn Féin have an outright victory in the urban elections. Mary Daly has drawn attention to the outcome of the local elections in 1920 in a valuable essay noting that neither Tullamore nor Birr's electorates were much supportive of Sinn Féin in the 1920 local election, with only 5 of the 15 members in Tullamore drawn from Sinn Féin, 2 Labour, 1 Independent Labour and 6 ratepayers. In Birr she noted there was a sizable unionist presence with 3 Sinn Féin, 7 Unionists, 2 Labour members and 9 Nationalists (21 seats in Birr).¹² At county level it was a different story with Sinn Féin very much dominating the scene. County Secretary Kingston had remarked in the aftermath of the county council election of 1920 that it was a remarkable and memorable one 'and he would go further and say a it was more revolutionary

10 Michael Byrne, 'King's County/Offaly, 1914–1918: from innovation to stagnation and ennui' in *Offaly and the Great War* (Tullamore, 2018), p. 66.

11 Michael Byrne, *Legal Offaly* (Tullamore, 2008), pp 340–41.

12 Mary Daly, 'From King's County to Offaly: Dáil Éireann and local government during the years of the Irish revolution' in William Nolan and Timothy P. O'Neill (eds), *Offaly history and society* (Dublin, 1998), pp 838–9 and see p. 838.

than the elections of 1898 when old three members of the old grand jury were transferred to the county council'.¹³ Only two members of the old county council were returned to the new county council of June 1920.



Map published with Ewart's Journey.

¹³ Michael Byrne, 'King's County/Offaly, 1914–1918: from innovation to stagnation and ennui' in *Offaly and the Great War* (Tullamore, 2018), p. 21; *Tullamore and King's County Independent*, 5 June 1920.

Ewart's book was published in April 1922, in the period after the cessation of hostilities and the Treaty but before the Civil War. The time of his visit to Offaly one year earlier was eventful in Ireland. The first Catholic lord lieutenant since the time of James II in the person of Viscount FitzAlen was sworn in on 2 May 1921. On 5 May Craig and de Valera met in Dublin. On 13 May all 124 Sinn Féin Candidates were returned unopposed to the Southern Irish parliament filling all seats. The only four independent members elected were those for Trinity College, Dublin. On 25 May the Custom House was burned by the I.R.A. but led to the capture of 100 men of the Dublin brigade.

Ewart's visit can be seen in the context of increasing frustration in England with the course of the war in Ireland which was not going as smoothly as the military would have liked. In April the bishop of Chelmsford with other church leaders in England appealed for a truce. Lord Derby travelled to Dublin incognito as 'Mr. Edwards' to talk to de Valera. The British government knew that allowing the Southern Irish elections to proceed would lead to the return of Sinn Féin everywhere without a contest. On 12 May the cabinet under the P.M., Lloyd George, rejected the idea of a truce. Ewart finished his essay in July 1921 but because of the Truce eventually signed on 9 July and the protracted negotiations which followed he felt it inadvisable 'in the public interest' to publish his account 'however non-partisan' (p. xi) until the following year.

His account would have shades of Northern Ireland in the pre-1998 period and his visit to Ireland would be akin to a southern Catholic walking down the Shankill Road. In Dublin he described the scene in the yard of Dublin Castle not unfamiliar to those who remember Jordan's *Michael Collins* film. On page nine of his book, in a paragraph that could be taken from a national daily of the late 1990s, Ewart queried how negotiations were going: 'In reply to an inquiry regarding the likely result of negotiations then believed to be taking place, my candid informant said:

"You may take it that negotiations - indirect, of course - have gone on continuously since last June (1920), but it has always seemed as though an extremist wing of Sinn Féin intended to wreck them. Whenever they seemed like succeeding, some particularly violent outrage has taken place which caused the Government to stiffen their backs for fear of seeming to give way to murder."

"Couldn't a truce have been fixed up but for Lloyd George's stipulation about the giving up of arms?"

Ewart commenced his visit in Dublin with a visit to AE (George Russell) and later left for Cork where his walk took him via Mallow, Thurles and Limerick to Birr, Kilcormac, Tullamore, Horseleap, Castletown, Mullingar to Dundalk and Ulster.



Castle Street, Birr about 1910 with Birr Castle in the background.



Main Street, Birr about 1910.

The extract from the *Journey* relating to the midlands

Market Day in Birr

April 30th [1921] was market-day in Birr.

And from about ten o'clock onwards small donkey-carts driven by ragged-looking peasants and containing poultry, vegetables, a calf, potatoes, eggs, a pig, came bowling into the little town. There were farm-wagons laden with hay, seed-corn, roots and other produce, there were governess-carts driven by farmers' wives, and motor-cars; there were bicyclists. Altogether Birr presented a lively appearance.

The heat-wave continued. The sun scorched the Duke of Cumberland's column in the centre of the square, that column which everybody told you was any day likely to tumble down. [The statue of the duke had been taken down for safety reasons in 1915]. The roadway was an inch deep in dust; they had pulled down the blinds in the County Club [the King's County and Ormond Club, later Eddie Enright's]. Two or three sleepy Black and Tans lounged on the steps of the yellow building opposite which was their home.

In the picturesque chestnut-shaded street which leads from the square to the Castle – hay-wagons [now Castle Street]. Follow the narrow twisting lane between the outer castle-wall and a row of grey cottages- potatoes. Rows of donkey-carts, rows of donkeys. Turn into a yard on the left-hand side - pigs. Pigs and a few sheep and a throng of red-faced, gaitered men talking pigs. Pigs talking too, squealing, grunting pigs, protesting pigs. Further along the street tethered in couples, fluttering, helpless, and tumbled together in feathery squawking heaps upon the pavement crammed into crates - poultry. Hens gasping from heat, gasping for air - a cruel sight. At the corner of the main street - calves. Calves netted and snared in little carts, and groups of dealers or farmers or smallholders talking calves. Confusion, too, confusion of backing carts, lazy donkeys, herded cattle, and bawling men and women. Where the pavement broadens, forming a kind of *cul de sac* - eggs. Heaps and heaps of eggs - mountains of eggs - housewives buying and selling eggs. Among the eggs, squatting, with their backs against the wall, two ancient gipsies, looking like automatized mummies done up in rags - the man tending his feet. Then vegetables, and all along the pavement such throngs of respectable-looking farmers, farmers' wives and disreputable-looking peasants, that one chances a kick from an ass and walks in the roadway. The shops, too, crowded. A couple of soldiers stroll by, a couple of R.I.C. men. People look curiously at you sometimes, make remarks to each other about you. You find yourself counting the number of green ties, green scarves, green costumes.

The market-luncheon begins at two. There assembled in the dining-room of the inn [probably Dooly's Hotel] a young Church of Ireland clergyman, two farmers, a commercial traveller. All know each other, all are evidently in the habit of meeting weekly. They reply to your "good morning" – and regard you with suspicion.

Conversation dwindles, then ceases altogether. Essays upon the weather, the market, the future of the crops, and the architectural peculiarities of Birr - with special reference to the Duke of Cumberland - meet with monosyllables. Thwarted and still-born, you retire: silence reigns except for the glad symphony of eating.

Finally you become conscious of definite, pointed hostility...

Such is Birr: Birr which lies on the borders of King's County and Tipperary, Birr which was the first place come to outside the martial law area, and therefore the first market, Birr which is sometimes called Parsonstown.

Here definitely one leaves the South, entering the less actively rebellious but more problematical Midlands.

"This is a Constitutional island in a sea of Sinn Fein," remarked a citizen as we strolled along the quiet road that leads to Galway under the walls of the castle in the cool of the evening. "Birr and the district around it have always been loyal, chiefly, I suppose, because it's been a garrison-town since time immemorial, because a lot of the soldiers - and officers, too - have married and settled down here. The town has not suffered in any way - touch wood! - our local Black and Tans are a well-behaved lot, and we've never so far had curfew. At the Local Government election, out of twenty-one elected candidates, only four were Sinn Feiners. You can't say that of many towns in Ireland!"

I agreed.

"But," he went on, "it's only like that in Birr itself and within a radius of two or three miles. Tullamore you'll find a much warmer spot. The political change there has only come about in the last few years though. In 1914 North Tipperary was so pro-British as to be positively Jingo. Hundreds of men volunteered to join up - and were told to go home again. Now all Tipperary, as you know, is red-hot Sinn Fein."

"What are the chief reasons for the change?" - a usual question.

"The blunders of the Government. If the Asquith Act [Home Rule] had been applied in 1914, even though Ulster had fought for it, all this trouble would have been avoided. War or no war, it would have been worthwhile."

"And then?"

"Well, the Easter Rebellion, and the executions after it, brought the whole country to its feet. Coming to later days, the repeated executions - in Cork and Dublin - and the rule of the Crown Forces have made for greater and more bitter resentment every day."

"By 'Crown Forces' I suppose you mean the Black and Tans?"

"The whole country is up in arms against them, but in Tullamore and Mullingar you'll find there's feeling against the Regulars too. This feeling may rankle, it may last - that depends on the settlement. A more dangerous thing is that the younger generation is growing up in an atmosphere of hatred of England, with recrimination as a birthright and revenge as a legacy."

"You think there is dislike of England then?"

"There is. And it's increasing because it's felt among us that the English *people* could put a stop to all this if they chose - could insist on a settlement. As to the Government, it's hopelessly mistrusted.

Whatever the Government does must be preceded by a pledge or pledges of sincerity."

"By the Government you really mean Lloyd George and Hamar Greenwood?"

The worthy fellow laughed.

“We’ve a saying here, ‘Don’t call it a lie, call it a Greenwood!’”

“And the Prime Minister?”

“Words, all words!”

“You see, these people don’t understand Ireland,” he explained. “Behind all the trouble, you’ve got to recognise an almost complete divorce of character and idea and point of view as between the average Englishman and the average Irishman. Individually they like one another but nationally they’ve never understood one another - perhaps never will.”

“The Government of Ireland Act_____?”

“Nobody has any use for the Government of Ireland Act hereabouts. It will fail. Financially it’s unsound, the system of nomination of the Senate is all wrong, the principle of partition fatal. The Bill’s not worth talking about.”

“What sort of settlement can you visualize then?”

“Dominion Home Rule perhaps, but it must include Ulster and fiscal autonomy. Yes – something like a Provincial Federative scheme on Swiss lines is a conceivable basis of solution, but economically you cannot put Munster and Connaught on a par with Leinster and Ulster, you know.”

While we were discussing the difficulties of a good relationship being established between England and the United States with the Irish Question still “in the air,” a lorry-load of soldiers singing and shouting, with rifles levelled, approached at furious speed and dashed by in a cloud of dust.

My friend, who had shown signs of uneasiness, said,

“You’ve got to be careful of these gentry when they’re like that.” I questioned him about the economic condition of the countryside.

“King’s County, of course, is mainly tillage and therefore prosperity is less conspicuous here than in dairy countries, but still it’s been very great.”

There was, so far as he knew, no Sinn Fein propaganda in the schools and no Russian money behind the Sinn Fein movement.

“But,” he added, “there’s plenty of American.”

My next conversation at Birr was with a certain **John Dooley** [sic], member of the King’s County Council and of the 1917



John Dooley,
Chair of King’s County Council, 1912–18
and
Birr Urban District Council, 1900–1924.

Convention. He began to speak at once of this abortive but significant event of recent Irish history.

“The result of the Convention split on a hair. Apart from the Nationalists, who wanted an immediate grant of fiscal autonomy, only the Ulster lot stood out of the agreement - and the Ulstermen were obstructionist. What the Government asked for was ‘substantial agreement’. That is exactly what they got. So they promptly turned down our Report because it was not unanimous.”

“The fact is,” my Nationalist friend went on disgustedly, “Lloyd George only thought of the Convention in order to fool people and keep them busy. Can you wonder that a Government led by him is mistrusted?”

“What do you think of the prospects of a settlement?”

“Ulster remains as ever, the crux of the question. But I am convinced that if a Parliament sat in Dublin, Ulster would soon want to come into it. The Partition Act [Government of Ireland Act, 1920] is useless if only because nobody in the country wants it except Antrim, Armagh, and Down. Far from making for a united Ireland, under it North and South would steadily drift apart. You can see for yourself that the Council of Ireland is unfairly composed - twenty representatives of the South and twenty of the North! Under the Act two sets of officials would be needed, so that half the country’s income would be wasted on running its machinery. Have a referendum in the Ulster counties for participation in the Northern and Southern Parliament - that might point a way out of it.”

“And fiscal autonomy?”

“There should be free trade between England and Ireland, and a mutually-chosen Commission could sit to decide what duties are to be imposed on foreign goods.”

“You see under present conditions,” Mr. Dooley continued, “the cleavage between North and South is being accentuated every day. Take the Agricultural Board, for instance. There you have a semi-official body drawn from the whole of Ireland, a body that has always worked very well up till now. Now it’s a farce.”

“What in your opinion is the shortest way to peace?”

“Raise Martial Law and remove military government. Give us fair treatment, I say, and the present bitterness will soon be forgotten.”

“Is this bitterness anti-English in origin or anti-Government?”

“There’s no personal hostility to English people here but there is resentment, deep resentment, that they do not help Ireland or interest themselves in her difficulties. As to the present policy of the Crown, all moderate people are being alienated by it. Every Unionist of note in this district for instance, has become a Constitutional Nationalist. The old Nationalists have become Sinn Feiners.”

The words were almost identical with those reiterated in Cork and elsewhere.

“All the older men in this country are Nationalists, and no Nationalist will have the Partition Act at any price. Make up your mind to that!”

I mentioned the recent appointment of a Roman Catholic Lord Lieutenant [Lord Fitz Alen].

“The question of his religion is of no political significance,” was Mr. Dooley’s rejoinder. “We don’t care tuppence what religion a man professes. Religion and politics are essentially different things in Southern Ireland.”

On the subject of local conditions, he said:

“Farmers are well-off enough. There is no emigration, so their families do the work free. Unemployment is about normal, but the working classes are badly off really, for work is spasmodic. There’s very little buying and selling. Shopkeepers want to keep their retail stocks low.”

A noticeable characteristic of this placid oasis in the heart of stormy Ireland was its normal daily and social life, the apparently well-to-do contentment of its inhabitants. In the market-square of an evening there was always a busy going to-and-fro. Black and Tans played football with the local youths, young ladies in white tennis frocks might be seen riding homeward on bicycles or starting up their cars. Cows strolled casually through the streets after milking.

I called upon a **local squire**, and found a charming country place with its equipment of lawns and gardens and a park, permanently inhabited. Nowhere in the country districts did the landed gentry appear to be disturbed in their normal habits by local conditions.

A well-known resident of the district drew my attention to the record of Birr in the war. Birr contributed a higher proportion of volunteers to the Army than any other town in Ireland. “Early in 1914,” he said, “twenty-six out of thirty-seven of my employees joined the Army.”

That religion as a factor in daily affairs cannot altogether be discounted outside Ulster is shown by the following incident.

Before an Urban District Council in King’s Co. came three applications by its employees under the Government grant to meet the extra cost of living. One of the applicants was a Roman Catholic, the other two Protestants. The population is predominantly Catholic, the proportion when the matter came to a vote being eleven to nine.

Every Catholic member of the U.D.C. had been zealously mobilised beforehand to ensure this majority. In the upshot the Catholic applicant was awarded an increase of £60 under the grant, while the two Protestants were awarded £5 each.

The views of the resident in question proved to be similar to those of his neighbours, though he claimed that the majority of King’s Co. farmers are really Conservative, but dare not say so. They had enjoyed under the Union unprecedented prosperity, though now perhaps beginning to realise that they were in for some lean years.

“The South does want a change, but people would be glad to accept a generous measure of Dominion Home Rule if clearly offered. The best solution of the Ulster question would be a plebiscite. Fiscal autonomy to be granted in Ireland, control of the Army, Navy, and foreign policy to remain as heretofore, the Irish contribution to the National Debt to be agreed upon. But,” he added, “hostility to England is growing, though not in this district. The Black and Tans have been quiet here, but unless they are brought under discipline elsewhere there can be no peace in this land.”

One of the most picturesque personalities I came across in this part of Ireland was **Archdeacon Ryan, of Birr**. Indeed, there was not a little in common between this fragile-looking, shy-mannered and unworldly priest and the steel-fibred leaders of Sinn Fein whom I had talked with in Cork. There was the same – how shall one say? – delicate adjustment of mind, softness of voice and manner, strain of poetry, faint perfume of idealism which mollifies, or appears to, the rigid nationalism.

“Look back at our history – have we much to thank you for?” These were the Archdeacon’s opening words. “Of course, we have some things to thank England for, nobody would deny it, and in some ways you perhaps have been badly treated. But you’ve offered us in the last twenty-one years only a fraction of what is our right.”

I inquired to whom in modern years he considered Ireland owed most.

“The best Chief Secretary we ever had was Morley; the best Lord Lieutenant, Lord Spencer.” [Morley was Chief Secretary in 1886 and 1892–95 while Spencer was L.L. 1876–80.]

Archdeacon Ryan’s words grew in intensity as he went on.

“If Irishmen thought they could get a Republic now, they would be glad of it. Given a free election, the majority of the people would undoubtedly vote for remaining outside the British Empire. Not that there is any personal dislike of Englishmen, but there is – and always has been – hatred of British rule. We are a separate nation. Wouldn’t you like to be master in your own house? ... If English people want to understand us, they ought to read more history.”

He paused. Then:

“Nobody trusts the present Government. The Partition Act is a useless farce; nobody wants it. A terrible account lies at Sir Edward Carson’s door.”

“But the country has prospered under the Union – is probably better off now than it has ever been?”

“Farmers and shopkeepers are well off here in King’s Co., not the common people.”

The Archdeacon went on to say that wages are £2 a week as compared with 14s. before the war, but work was not regular and all men had idle periods, especially agricultural labourers, masons, slaters, carpenters, painters. There was no building

going on; there were a hundred unemployed in Birr alone. If wages were two and a half times greater, prices were nearly the same, e.g. :*(this was in May)

Milk	8d. a quart.
Eggs	3s. a dozen.
Meat	2s. a lb.
Potatoes	2s. a stone.
Coal (retail, per cwt.)	£5 a ton.

“Potatoes,” he said, “are seldom the sole diet nowadays. American meat is nearly always eaten, though it is of poor quality. Bread and tea are staples. A certain amount of porter is drunk, but there is practically no drunkenness.”¹⁴

“Peat, by the time it is dug and carried, is nearly as dear as coal. Nowadays only about one man in twenty has a donkey-cart of his own.”

Questioned on another point:

“The story of anti-English propaganda in our schools is a damnable lie,” said Archdeacon Ryan emphatically. “Nor do our women interest themselves in politics. They have too much else to do.”

“Can you suggest, then, how peace can be brought back to this unhappy country?”

“If we can get fair play we shall not be on strained relations with our neighbours,” was the reply. “Let us set up housekeeping on different lines, and we shall get on very well. But the last five years will leave a bad mark in the history of English administration.”

“By that you mean _____?”

“The first step to peace is the control of the Crown Forces. If you let loose a lot of young men without character or control to do as they will, of course they get out of hand and break the law.”

“But the I.R.A.?”

“The I.R.A. is inspired by pure patriotism. The ideals of the After-War were largely responsible for the rapid evolution of Sinn Fein from the old Nationalism. Those ideals England has forgotten. But those are our ideals still.”

Archdeacon Ryan’s last word was:

“You cannot kill the soul of a people. You can no more do so than I can kill your soul.”

The Tullamore Road

A May Day sun baked down upon the market square of Birr. It was early yet, and Sunday; the square was empty but for a few stray folk on their way to Mass.

14 For more on war-time price increases see Michael Byrne, ‘King’s County/Offaly, 1914–1918: from innovation to stagnation and ennui’ in *Offaly and the Great War* (Tullamore, 2018), pp 64–65.

I hoped to walk the twenty-two miles to Tullamore by tea-time and, allowing for accidents, to cover at least half the distance in advance of the noonday heat.

The whitewashed and dun houses, the new-looking church on the first straight stretch out of the town were quickly left behind. There followed a bosky park-like country, uphill and down, the road ribboning ahead in long steady gradients. Green ridges rose on either hand, masses of yellow-prinked gorse filled the hollows, hawthorn in blossom and the whitish pink of crab-apple trees here and there sprinkled the green of hedgerows and fir-trees. Green was the prevailing tone of the countryside - a green so vivid and fresh and dew-sparkling as to suggest that a brand-new, super-beautiful world had been born in the night.

Mountains dreamed to the east. Slieve Bloom dreamed in blue-grey majesty of mist, a hazy mirage lying upon the peaks, a bluish film of heat above the intervening country. After the first two or three miles wide, flat spaces of brackish-brown bog opened up between the road and the mountains.

A few people passed at first - three men riding bicycles townwards, a man and a boy driving a donkey-cart with a load of peat, a man herding cows from one field to another. All nodded or said "Good morning." Two wild-looking women came up behind in a donkey-cart, followed by some girls and men on bicycles, who turned down a side-road, being apparently on their way to mass at a neighbouring village.

Three miles out a wide, deep trench had been dug across the road - a trench just wide enough and just deep enough to wreck any vehicle that should attempt to compass it. A long, empty stretch between the bog and the hillside followed, at the end of which three holes, of the size and depth of shell-holes, had been dug triangular-wise in the roadway, leaving a narrow pathway for the foot-passenger, but ensuring certain perdition to bicycle or car.

The chief characteristic of the remaining seven miles to Kilcormac was their extreme loneliness. Only at one place, some children were sprawling outside a broken-down farmstead which otherwise betrayed no semblance of life, although one suspected that its inhabitants were watching from the interior.

For miles at a stretch the only sign or sound was the hovering shadow and far-away whistle of a sparrow-hawk, the "ting-ting" of greenfinches and chaffinches in the hedgerows, the melancholy piping of redshank from the bog, the cries of black-headed gulls which, doubtless nesting beside some nearby tarn, continually swept and swooped above the road. Yellowhammers vied in hue with the brilliant gorse, butterflies flickered along the grassy border. Goats, cows, and donkeys completely independent of control made this their feeding-ground, or lay asleep in the dust of the road.

A group of young men standing in the sunny Kilcormac village street eyed me suspiciously. I stopped at the inn, the landlord of which, to my surprise, served me with a will, pressed me to sit down and rest in his cool stone parlour, and finally refused my offer of payment.

I decided, after a quarter of an hour's rest, to press on and break the backbone of the journey. After crossing a bridge that spanned a gurgling rocky stream [the Silver River], signs of Republican activity became more apparent. Trees recently felled lay by the roadside, some trenches that had been dug up had evidently been filled in. I came suddenly up against a huge barrier.

This was at a point where the road curved round the flank of a hill and was shaded by trees. Four heavy beech-trunks interlaced with boughs had been thrown across it, forming a twelve-foot high obstacle not dissimilar to, though far more substantial than, a fence at Aintree. To circumvent this I climbed through a hedge, crossing the corner of a field, and joined the road through another hedge. The white walls of a farmhouse gleamed through foliage at a short distance, three hundred yards beyond the main obstacle a stiff fence of boughs had been erected, and fifty yards beyond this again was a newly dug trench. Of human or other being there was neither sight nor sound, the crow of a cock being the only sign that the farmhouse was inhabited.

But a mile further on a shifting patch of blue vividly contrasted with the hillside's emerald green. A dark-haired handsome girl accompanied by a child came down to the roadside.

"And where might you be making for?"

"Tullamore."

"Have you your fiddle with you?"

The girl looked meaningly at my rucksack.

"Are you not the fiddler from Tullamore? Will you play us a tune?"

"I am travelling through Ireland. Perhaps I shall write in the newspaper."

"Is that so? Will you give me one then?"

To be taken at one time for a local fiddler and a vendor of newspapers is not everybody's experience. Our colloquy continued for some minutes. When I continued my journey the girl and the child were laughing amazedly, still unable to make me out....

After a while I sat down to rest near a cottage. An unkempt peasant woman brought me a glass of milk and, as the publican had done, refused payment. At the back of the dark cabin's interior I espied a young man lying on a bed. Half a mile farther on a figure stood on the skyline at some distance from the road, watching me intently. It continued to watch until I was out of sight.

My feet began to blister, thirst increased, and the heat raised a mirage over everything. Another four miles brought me to a public-house at cross-roads. Half a dozen youths leaning against the wall of the inn [at Blue Ball] cast anything but friendly glances at me and answered my question as to the distance to Tullamore gruffly. At this moment five young men on bicycles rode up from a side-road and, dismounting, joined in conversation with the original group. From the lowering

glances directed at me, I realised that I was the object of their attention, but decided that there was no use in hanging about. After walking a few hundred yards, I had an instinctive intimation of someone following. Sure enough, as I looked over my shoulder, a man came into sight round a bend in the road. I waited for him to come up. A middle-aged peasant, he spoke with an air of surly suspicion and inquired sarcastically whether I had had much difficulty in getting along the road. I replied that I had encountered – obstacles. We walked alongside for nearly half a mile, speaking laconically of the crops and the weather. He then turned into a field and left me with, as I thought, a rather sinister grin. Feeling certain now that something was “in the wind,” I plodded on apprehensively, not looking back. Another half-mile brought me to a place where a large fir-wood on one side of the road faced a bog on the other. I suddenly heard the rustle of bicycle-wheels close behind and, looking round, was confronted by the five young men.

“Stop! Hands up!”

They leapt off and laid their bicycles by the road. The leader of the party, a dark, gipsy-faced fellow of about twenty-two, with a mop of matted hair and a somewhat ferocious expression, seized my arms with a policeman’s grip, while another, who closely resembled him, dragged off my rucksack with no light hand and passed it to his companions. All the young men wore caps and dark suits of clothes. My pockets were turned out, my purse, containing several £1 notes and other trifles, being taken. I was then ordered to sit down by the roadside.

The half-hour that followed was much less than pleasant. Innocuous tourist though I was, friend of Ireland though I believed myself to be, the little slip of paper with which I had armed myself down-country along seemed to stand between me and a peremptory fate. For to the rest of my identifications and references, which filled a large envelope, my captors paid no attention whatsoever. My eyes wandered repeatedly to the bog and my thoughts to the number of people who had lately been found in bogs with brief notes attached to them. On a parallel road just a week ago (I graphically recalled) a police inspector had been kidnapped and had not been heard of since.

Meanwhile the five Republicans were busying themselves with my mundane possessions. The contents of the rucksack lay in the road, my papers (and incidentally my pyjamas) were being dismembered. I could hear one of the party (who seemed to be a sort of Intelligence Officer) reading aloud the wording of my precious slip of paper. Another seemed profoundly interested in Justin McCarthy’s *Outline of Irish History*; a third was perusing the hieroglyphics in my note-book. A long muttered conversation followed, during which the only words that caught my ear were “man” and “road.”

At last the leader turned from the group. “I think the man’s all right.”

I was thereupon handed back the contents of my pockets and curtly told to count my money, which out of politeness I omitted to do (but which I afterwards

did and found correct). I now noticed that the three subordinate members of the party were decent, respectable-looking youths of ages between eighteen and twenty-one. They helped me to put my things together and lifted my rucksack onto my shoulders.

We parted with mutual “good afternoons.”

Two miles short of Tullamore, the bridge spanning a swift-flowing little river [the Clodiagh at Mucklagh] had been blown up - so thoroughly demolished at the centre, in fact, as to leave a chasm too wide to jump. The only alternative was to wade the stream - no unpleasant task for swollen feet - and to make a detour through some birch-woods to a point where it was possible to join the road again.

That was the last physical obstacle. But, walking into Tullamore rather conspicuously dusty and a traveller, battery after battery of coldly hostile glances were directed at me by men who scowled as I passed, scowled after me, scowled up at the window of the inn where I sat at dinner. Everybody seemed to see in an English stranger a potential spy. At first I was inclined to put this feeling down to an undue sensitiveness induced by the events of the day; but the veracity of it was confirmed next morning when I was openly reviled by an apparently sober and respectable Irishwoman on the railway station platform who evidently took me for a plain-clothes Black and Tan. The first remarks that caught my ear were: “I said I *will* not be walked over. I can only die once, and I’ll be happy to give my life for Ireland.” The lady’s choicest sentiments then became unprintable; suffice to say that everything not good enough for Irishmen was “good enough for English dogs,” and that the majority of her sentences ended with the exhortation, “Shoot me if you like! Yes – trample on my dead body!”

Ewart soon departed Tullamore where he noted that because of a recent outrage curfew was at 9 p.m.¹⁵ ‘Up to within a few minutes of this hour the streets were full of people taking the air. When, however, two lines of Black and Tans appeared advancing concentrically along the principal streets with rifles at the trail everybody fled homeward. Only here and there impudent young women defied the majesty and might of the Crown up to and even beyond the last moment, answering stern admonitions to



Charleville/O'Connor Square, Tullamore about 1910.

15 Probably the incidents of 1 April, when a least three separate attacks were made on Tans in Tullamore and resulting in wounding of two and the death of Matthew Kane (see online at Bureau of Military History, Brigade Activity Reports, available at: <http://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/military-service-pensions-collection-1916-1923/brigade-activities/>).



Charleville Square/O'Connor Square, west, about 1920.

“get home in quick time” with laughter and sallies of wit. That it was not altogether a laughing matter, however, the sharp “crack” of a rifle presently attested.’

‘On Monday May 2nd, I took train to Clara, and thence resumed the road to Mullingar. .’

Extract ends . . .

In Mullingar Ewart met John P. Hayden, the former Nationalist M.P. who concluded that Ireland would be satisfied with a generous measure of Dominion Home Rule.¹⁶ Some ten days later the country (excluding the six counties and Trinity College) returned Sinn Féin candidates unopposed. Dominion status opposed by Lloyd George in April-May 1921 was on offer in July of that year. Negotiations on the Treaty began in London on 11 October and concluded on 6 December with scarcely a break. Ultimately peace as a dominion was accepted by the majority of the Irish people albeit in a divided Ireland.

Conclusion

Ewart was both brave and foolhardy to take on a journey fraught with danger in war-torn Ireland. A twenty-nine-year old Englishman was at risk as was shown by his being stopped at Blue Ball by five I.R.A. men and not far from where spies had been executed. It appears he had contacts in Ireland such as Frederick W. Ryan

16 James P. Hayden (1863–1954), a strong supporter of Parnell and later of Redmond, founded the *Westmeath Examiner* in 1882 and was its editor for over seventy years. See Paul Rouse in *DIB*, iv, pp 530–3; for Hayden’s earlier phase see Michael Nolan, *The Parnell split in Westmeath: the bishop and the newspaper editor* (Dublin, 2018).

who had been in the Young Ireland branch of the United Irish League. Ewart had also obtained letters of support from prominent Sinn Féin men in Cork. It was a risky business to carry credentials from the opposing parties, but just worked. These letters of support may have helped with his introductions in Birr where he met the chairman of the urban council (Dooly, a Redmondite) and the parish priest and possibly also Rosse's agent (Toler Garvey), but not named. Ewart did not fare so well in Tullamore and one is surprised that he did not get to meet the chairman of the urban council Patrick Egan. The parish priest, Fr Callary, was by 1921 a great age and died in 1925. Unlike his predecessors he was less interested in politics, but did condemn the shooting of R.I.C. Sergeant Cronin on 31 October 1920. Archdeacon Ryan of Birr would do the same in the aftermath of the killing of two constables at Kinnitty in May 1921. Perhaps Ewart's Birr informant would be less willing to describe Birr as a 'constitutional island in a sea of Sinn Féin' had he met Ewart in late May 1921 instead of late April, or had Ewart come to Birr just before the Truce when the Pearson brothers were shot at Coolacree near Cadamstown.

Ewart's sympathetic account of the war in Ireland provides colour and a welcome relief from the claims and counter claims of the opposing sides in the War of Independence and, though we are not concerned with it here, his onward visit to Belfast after Mullingar provides, as Maume and Bew note, a welcome interconnectedness between north and south in that crucial period.¹⁷

17 See the Paul Bew and Patrick Maume introduction to Wilfrid Ewart, *A Journey to Ireland 1921* (Dublin, 2008), pp xvii–xx.