

County Galway's 1916 Rising: A Short History

Liam Mellows moved to Athenry in the spring of 1915 and became the chief organiser for the Irish Volunteers in County Galway. During Easter Week 1916, he led a substantial number of Volunteers in a Rising in the east of County Galway, which lasted from Tuesday 25 April to Saturday 29 April. The small village of Killeeneen, located between Clarenbridge and Craughwell, was the starting point of the county's Rising on Easter Tuesday, with the cottage and schoolhouse of the late Hubert Walsh serving as Mellows' headquarters. Having mobilised his forces, who were dressed in an assortment of attire, including forage hats and Sam Browne belts, Mellows marched through the Redington estate and led almost 100 Volunteers in an attack on the RIC barracks at Clarenbridge. The confrontation lasted from around 7:20 am to 10:38 am. Although the rebels failed to take the barracks, it is believed that a small number of policemen were taken as prisoners.¹ Throughout the incident, spiritual assistance was provided by Father Harry Feeney, who acted as Chaplain to the rebels.² The siege of the barracks continued until police reinforcements arrived from Kilcolgan.³

In another incident sometime between 12:00 pm and 1:00 pm on Tuesday, Joe Howley and Michael Athy led around 106 Volunteers in an attack on the front and rear of the RIC barracks in Oranmore village. After an unsuccessful attempt to take the barracks, they linked up with Mellows' men halfway on the road between Oranmore and Clarenbridge. The combined force of over 200 Volunteers then renewed the attack on Oranmore. Explosives were used by a group of rebels, led by Eamonn Corbett of Killeeneen, to blast a hole in the middle of a strategic road bridge at Millplot, on the northern side of Oranmore. To stop the flow of traffic on the southern side of the village, a barricade was erected on the road to Clarenbridge, while another one was set up between Clarenbridge and Kilcolgan. The rebels also cut over 200 yards of the Galway-Athenry railway line at Derrydonnell.⁴ However, in a tactical miscalculation, the railway line from Oranmore to Galway town was left intact. According to one estimate, six policemen were captured at Oranmore.⁵

At around 7:30 pm on Tuesday, police reinforcements from Galway town arrived in Oranmore, accompanied by a party of 10 Connaught Rangers from Renmore barracks under the command of Captain Andrew Armstrong.⁶ Due to the 'superior fire-power' of the authorities, the rebels were forced 'to retreat out of the town ... along the Athenry road'.⁷ After marching for about six miles eastwards along the main Oranmore-Athenry road, the Clarenbridge, Oranmore and Maree Volunteers arrived after 9:00 pm at the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction's model farm, located about a mile to the south-west of Athenry town. At this location, situated on land owned by the Goodbody Quakers in the townland of Ballygarraun West, they met up with additional Companies. Among these were the Athenry Volunteers, who had been forced to abandon Athenry town, which 'was strongly held by 200 well-armed police' after the Rising started.⁸

After getting word of what was going on in the capital, the authorities in Galway town declared Martial Law and quickly secured the main public buildings, including the GPO. According to the *Galway Observer*, other premises closed 'of their own accord, so that the town presented the appearance of a city preparing for a siege'.⁹ By around 6:00 pm on Tuesday evening, District Inspector Neilan arrived into the town 'with about 70 men from the Connemara district'.¹⁰ Members of the National Volunteers also set up patrols in the town. A reserve civilian force was raised too, with backing from a committee chaired by a prominent businessman, Máirtín Mór McDonogh.

The only fatality of the Rising in County Galway was Patrick Whelan, a 38-year-old policeman who was stationed at Eglinton Street barracks. Constable Whelan was killed by a gunshot to the left side of his head at Carnmore Crossroads between 5:00 am and 5:30 am on Wednesday 26 April, during a shootout between an RIC reconnaissance unit under District Inspector Heard (assisted by soldiers commanded by Captain Bodkin) and a group of rebels. The men who gathered at Carnmore belonged to the Castlegar and Claregalway Volunteers,

commanded by Brian Molloy and Nicholas Kyne respectively.¹¹ Panic and fear gripped Galway town after the killing, as did unfounded stories about a possible attack by the rebels. In the end, the ominous presence of British warships in Galway Bay – including the *HMS Guillemot*, *HMS Laburnum*, *HMS Gloucester* and *HMS Snowdrop* – was sufficient to thwart any potential attack on the town centre. The navy established a territorial marker by directing artillery fire towards the townlands of Castlegar, Ballindooly and Lydican – all located in sparsely populated countryside beyond the town's north-eastern boundary. The *HMS Laburnum*, an *Acacia*-class sloop built by Charles Connell & Company, was responsible for firing 'on Castlegar hill' and the approaches to the town on Wednesday afternoon. As this was happening, 'observers were on the roof of the Railway Hotel to report results'.¹² One of the shells 'burst in Ballinfoyle [Ballinfoile]', located a short distance inside the municipal boundary.¹³ Shells were also fired towards Oranmore on Wednesday, leaving 'holes ploughed in the earth'.¹⁴

The total number of rebels who occupied the model farm, from Tuesday night to Wednesday afternoon, has been estimated variously as 500, 600 or 700 Volunteers.¹⁵ Initially, the occupying force on Tuesday night was made up of the Athenry, Cussaun, Derrydonnell, Kilconierin, Newcastle and Rockfield (Craughwell) Volunteers. Not long afterwards, the number of Companies at the model farm rose to nine, after the arrival of the Clarenbridge, Oranmore and Maree Volunteers.¹⁶ At around 11 am the following morning, the rebel force grew to 11 identifiable Companies, following the arrival of the Castlegar and Claregalway Volunteers from Carnmore.¹⁷ Most of the rebels consisted of young Catholic men from small farming, labouring and artisan upbringings. The majority of them were members of GAA clubs and some were Irish-speakers and Gaelic League members. However, they were poorly armed with approximately 25 rifles, 60 revolvers, 60 pikes and 300 shotguns. Their miscellaneous arsenal also included homemade hand-grenades, bayonets, hayforks and a number of improvised weapons.¹⁸ For the short duration of their stay, 'ample accommodation' was 'found in the big lofts'.¹⁹ At about 7:00 am on Wednesday, around seven RIC from Athenry arrived within 400 yards of the model farm. However, a group of rebels led by Frank Hynes managed to repulse the attack.²⁰ About four hours after this incident, Mellows held a Council of War with Larry Lardner, Dick Murphy, Eamon Corbett, Matty Neilan, Tom Ruane and Father Feeney. Ruane suggested that the Volunteers should be broken up into small columns to fight against the police, but the meeting decided against this course of action.²¹ In the afternoon, the atmosphere at the farm became more tense after the *Laburnum* started shelling the countryside around Galway town. At one stage in the day, an 'official report' was sent out, announcing 'that warships were getting the range at Athenry'.²²

On the same afternoon, Mellows abandoned the model farm and led the rebels in a retreat to Moyode Castle in Kilconierin parish – a derelict residence located about three miles to the south-east. The 'castle', which was owned by Lady Ardilaun, was easily seized when the rebels arrived at around 4:00 pm, as it was only protected by a caretaker, John Shackleton.²³ As Mellows waited in Moyode for news of events in the wider region, his new location beside the Dooyërtha River left 'the way open alternatively to Gort or to the Shannon'.²⁴ In the meantime, he established a chain of lookout posts around the outer reaches of Moyode. A railway bridge at Craughwell was damaged, seemingly with the objective of stopping military reinforcements moving in by rail from Limerick.²⁵ At one stage, police scouts from Athenry tried to make an advance towards Moyode, but they 'were chased back to their barracks'.²⁶ However, the rebels' situation was becoming increasingly hazardous. On Thursday afternoon, 'a large force of infantry and cavalry, with a battery of artillery and machine guns and armoured cars' arrived in Athenry, having set out from Loughrea.²⁷ The rebels ended up staying at Moyode for Wednesday and Thursday nights, and most of Friday. While there, cooking was done by Cumann na mBan women, who also administered first aid. Father Feeney delivered general absolution to those going on scouting missions.²⁸ Thomas Davis's song, 'A Nation Once Again', was sung next to the camp fire 'in an atmosphere tense with optimism and excitement'.²⁹ Such sanguinity was short lived, as around 200 men ended up leaving Moyode early. Some of those who departed were opposed to prolonging the campaign due to the scarcity of arms. Those

who remained at Moyode were now faced with the threat of soldiers and policemen advancing from both the west and the east.

On Friday, the rebels retreated south-westwards from Moyode Castle in the direction of County Clare. Whilst acknowledging that they had been 'practically hemmed in at the time', Mellows later defended the abandonment of Moyode on the grounds that 'it was believed that Cork and Kerry were out and that a junction would be effected with them, rousing Clare on the way'.³⁰ Those who stayed with Mellows made up a depleted column – estimated variously as 150, 300 or 400 Volunteers. Having moved through almost 15 miles of poor country roads in the evening (past Craughwell and through Monksfield, Ballyglass and Cockstown), the fatigued party reached their final destination in Kiltomas parish in the hours of darkness – an unoccupied residence near Peterswell called Limepark House. The time of their arrival at the big house, which was the former residence of the Persses and was now surrounded by thick shrubbery, has been estimated variously as 11:00 pm on Friday, 12:00 am on Saturday or 1:00 am on Saturday. Sometime in the early hours of Saturday morning, a decision was taken to disband and to set the prisoners free, thus ending County Galway's Rising. Most of the Volunteers returned to their homes with immediate effect, by taking to the byways and fields.³¹ According to Mattie Neilan, 'it was with the greatest reluctance' that the Volunteers 'began to break up'. Although they 'had to abandon their fight', he felt that 'they had struck their blow' for freedom.³²

After the disbandment of the main rebel group, Mellows went on the run with Alf Monaghan and Frank Hynes. After leaving the grounds of Limepark House, they made their way by foot to a farm residence owned by Peter Howley's father in Cockstown East, located less than a mile away. After a meal of meat with tea, the trio departed in the early morning. In the days that followed, they made their way southwards through Ballycahan, Lurgan, Knockroe, Druminalough, Cournageeha and Gortacarnaun.³³ After crossing into County Clare and passing through Drumandoora and Loughaun, they ended up hiding in a hut in Kilduff Upper (near Tulla) for five months, with the help of Michael Maloney, a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB).³⁴ Disguised in a black gossamer veil, Mellows fled to Queenstown (Cobh) in October 1916 and then sailed to Liverpool. After crossing the Atlantic, he arrived in New York around mid-December 1916.

Others were not so lucky in evading the authorities. Across Ireland, more than 3,100 people were arrested and around 2,500 of them were deported in May 1916. Many of these were Volunteers from County Galway, who were taken away by train to Richmond Barracks or Arbour Hill and then sent abroad to different British prisons. Of the 1,800 or so Irish rebels who were interned at Frongoch camp in south Wales in early June, 322 were men from County Galway – a number second only to County Dublin. More than 1,100 prisoners were released from the camp in August, with the rest remaining interned until shortly before Christmas.³⁵ Although the 1916 Rising was a military failure, it still gave realisation to 'the dream of self-determination' becoming 'a reality' and proved to be one of those 'moments in history when a seed is sown and the old order changes forever'.³⁶

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¹ *The Sunday Independent*, 28 May 1916; V. Whitmarsh, *Shadows on Glass. Galway 1895-1960: A Pictorial Record* (Privately Published, Galway, 2003), p. 318; C. Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution* (An Ghlór Gafa, Belfast, 2004), p. 88; Ú. Newell, 'The Rising of the Moon: Galway 1916', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, Vol. 58 (2006), p. 125; C. McNamara, "'The Most Shoneen Town in Ireland": Galway in 1916', *History Ireland*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2011), p. 35; M. McCarthy, *Ireland's 1916 Rising: Explorations of History-Making, Commemoration & Heritage in Modern Times* (Ashgate, Farnham, 2012), p. 65.

² Secret Memo Written by Neville Chamberlain re. Rev. H. Feeney, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, MS. Asquith 43/121; P. Ó Laoi, *History of Castlegar Parish* (The Connacht Tribune Ltd., Galway, Undated), pp. 147-48.

³ *The Connacht Tribune*, 20 May 1916.

⁴ *The Galway Express*, 29 April 1916; *The Connacht Tribune*, 20 May 1916; *The Sunday Independent*, 28 May 1916; *The Gaelic American*, 20 January 1917; *The Connacht Tribune*, 9 April 1966; Newell, 'The Rising of the Moon', pp. 125-26.

⁵ M. Neilan, 'The Rising in Galway', *The Capuchin Annual 1966*, No. 33 (1966), p. 325. A report in *The Galway Express*, 6 May 1916, suggests that only five policemen were captured, namely: Constable McDermott from Oranmore, Constable Walsh from Lydican and Constables Manning, Malone and Davoran from Kilcolgan.

⁶ *The Sunday Independent*, 28 May 1916; *The Connacht Tribune*, 9 April 1966.

⁷ Neilan, 'The Rising in Galway', p. 325.

⁸ *The Gaelic American*, 20 January 1917. On Easter Monday, the authorities in Athenry were quick to respond once they heard about the fighting taking place in Dublin. According to Ailbhe Ó Monacháin, 30 September 1949, National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), Bureau of Military History Witness Statement (hereafter BMHWS) No. 298, 'the RIC garrison ... at once seized a house facing the barracks [at the end of Barrack Lane] and fortified it and the barracks', while reinforcements 'from outlying stations were rushed in'. Nearby in Clarke Street, the Athenry Volunteers gathered in Murphy's town hall and spent the night there making bombs. Due to the heavy police presence in the town, a plan to attack the police barracks was shelved by the rebels.

⁹ *Galway Observer*, 29 April 1916.

¹⁰ *Galway Observer*, 29 April 1916.

¹¹ *The Galway Express*, 29 April 1916; Patrick Callanan, 24 January 1950, NAI, BMHWS No. 347; *The Connacht Tribune*, 9 April 1966; *The Connacht Tribune*, 5 April 1991; Ó Laoi, *History of Castlegar Parish*, p. 139; Newell, 'The Rising of the Moon', p. 126; M. A. Vaughan, 'Finding Constable Whelan: An Incident from 1916', *Ossory, Laois and Leinster*, Vol. 4, (2010), pp. 231-36.

¹² Frank Hardiman, 25 June 1950, NAI, BMHWS No. 406; J. de Courcy Ireland, *The Sea and the Easter Rising* (Maritime Institute of Ireland, Dublin, 1966), p. 47.

¹³ *The Galway Observer*, 29 April 1916.

¹⁴ *The Gaelic American*, 20 January 1917.

¹⁵ *The Gaelic American*, 20 January 1917; Ailbhe Ó Monacháin, 30 September 1949, NAI, BMHWS No. 298; Michael Kelly, 22 January 1957, NAI, BMHWS No. 1564; *The Irish Independent*, 11 April 1966, Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows*, p. 90; C. Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (Allen Lane, London, 2005), p. 229.

¹⁶ Martin Newell, 21 January 1957, NAI, BMHWS No. 1562; Michael Kelly, 22 January 1957, NAI, BMHWS No. 1564.

¹⁷ *The Gaelic American*, 20 January 1917; D. Ryan, *The Rising: The Complete Story of Easter Week* (Golden Eagle Books Ltd., Dublin, 1949), p. 246; Michael Kelly, 22 January 1957, NAI, BMHWS No. 1564; *The Connacht Tribune*, 9 April 1966; Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows*, pp. 89, 91.

¹⁸ John (Seán) Broderick, 24 January 1950, NAI, BMHWS No. 344; *The Connacht Tribune*, 16 April 1966; F. Campbell, 'The Easter Rising in Galway', *History Ireland*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2006), pp. 23-24.

¹⁹ *The Gaelic American*, 20 January 1917.

²⁰ *The Gaelic American*, 20 January 1917; Evidence of Stephen Jordan, Statement Made Before Advisory Committee by Messrs Neilan, Jordan and Newell, 9 June 1937, Military Archives, Cathal Brugha Barracks (hereafter MACBB), Military Service Pensions Collection (hereafter MSPC), Easter Week 1916 County Galway (Activities) A/21(4)A/3; Frank Hynes, 19 October 1950, NAI, BMHWS No. 446; Neilan, 'The Rising in Galway', p. 325.

²¹ Patrick Callanan, 24 January 1950, NAI, BMHWS No. 347.

²² *The Irish Independent*, 11 April 1966.

²³ *The Connacht Tribune*, 16 April 1966; Campbell, 'The Easter Rising in Galway', p. 23.

²⁴ Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows*, p. 91.

²⁵ *The Galway Express*, 6 May 1916; Patrick Callanan, 24 January 1950, NAI, BMHWS No. 347.

²⁶ *The Connacht Tribune*, 20 May 1916.

²⁷ *The Connacht Tribune*, 20 May 1916.

²⁸ Margaret Grealy to Oscar Traynor, Minister for Defence, 20 September 1943, MACBB, MSPC, MSP34REF14668; *The Connacht Tribune*, 16 April 1966; Newell, 'The Rising of the Moon', p. 127.

²⁹ C. Desmond Greaves, *The Easter Rising in Song and Ballad* (Kahn and Averill, London, 1980), p. 65.

³⁰ *The Gaelic American*, 20 January 1917.

³¹ *The Galway Express*, 6 May 1916; *The Connacht Tribune*, 20 May 1916; *Sinn Féin*, 26 April 1924; Peter Howley, 22 March 1956, NAI, BMHWS No. 1,379; *The Connacht Tribune*, 9 April 1966; *The Connacht Tribune*, 16 April 1966; *The Connacht Tribune*, 23 April 1966; Neilan, 'The Rising in Galway', p. 326; Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows*, p. 93; Newell, 'The Rising of the Moon', pp. 127-28.

³² Neilan, 'The Rising in Galway', p. 326.

³³ *Sinn Féin*, 26 April 1924; Ailbhe Ó Monacháin, 30 September 1949, NAI, BMHWS No. 298; Peter Howley, 22 March 1956, NAI, BMHWS No. 1,379; *The Connacht Tribune*, 2 April 1966; *The Connacht Tribune*, 16 April 1966; Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows*, pp. 94-96.

³⁴ *Sinn Féin*, 26 April 1924; Seán McNamara, 16 December 1954, NAI, BMHWS No. 1,047; Seán O'Keefe, 29 September 1955, NAI, BMHWS No. 1,261; Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows*, pp. 95-98.

³⁵ Thomas McInerney, 22 April 1955, NAI, BMHWS No. 1,150; T. G. McMahon (Ed.), *Pádraig Ó Fathaigh's War of Independence: Recollections of a Galway Gaelic Leaguer* (Cork University Press, Cork, 2000), p. 8; C. Ó Comhraí, *Revolution in Connacht: A Photographic History 1913-23* (Mercier Press, Cork, 2013), p. 33.

³⁶ Government of Ireland, 'Foreword', in Anon., 1916-2016: *Clár Comórtha Céad Bliain. Centenary Programme* (Government of Ireland, Dublin, 2015), p. 4.