

The Sinn Fein Comhairle Ceanntar of Dublin in June 1972 organised a series of meetings to commemorate the Birth of Wolfe Tone. Liam McMillen who at that time was wanted by the British Army was invited to deliver a lecture on the role of the IRA, 1962–1967. The meeting was held in Tailor's Hall, Dublin.

Lecture — The Role of the I.R.A. 1962–1967

By Liam McMillen June 1972.

I have chosen as the subject for my talk tonight, "*The role of the IRA in the North from 1962 to 1967*". I chose this period for the very good reason that it is the period with which I am most familiar and also because I believe that it was one of the most difficult and challenging periods that has ever confronted the Movement. It was a period of re-appraisal and change, and the role of the IRA in the North as elsewhere during those crucial years was central to the dramatic developments we are witnessing today. Selective force was employed during the period and contributed in large measure I believe to those developments.

The defeat of the 1956–62 campaign in the North had a traumatic effect on the IRA. Although the organisation was not completely shattered, the moral effect of that defeat was sufficient to cause a full scale re-evaluation of IRA strategy and tactics. In the first instance it was seen that physical force alone had failed. The people had not rallied to support the guerillas in the field. The support that had been readily given in the early stages of the campaign had begun to fall away in 1957 when it was seen that the Belfast and Dublin governments were getting the upperhand of the IRA and the IRA had to face the fact that armed resistance to British rule in the North was getting the cold shoulder from the overwhelming mass of the Irish people on both sides of the border.

After the end of the campaign in 1962 many of the men who had been on active service became dis-spirited and succumbed to the general feeling of hopelessness and despair and drifted off to attempt to build their personal lives again.

The initials IRA had become synonymous with defeat in the eyes of the people and the task of re-building the organisation in the face of paralysing apathy and lack of support from the ordinary people was a daunting one, but as before men were found ready and willing to undertake that task.

In the years following the defeat of the '56–'62 campaign the establishments North and South were at the zenith of their power and were firmly entrenched in their positions of patronage and privilege for as far into the future as the eye could see. Members of the Free State Government in their public utterances or when they came North to speak at Hibernian and other pseudo-nationalist functions, openly and unashamedly preached the two-nations theory, claiming that the fight for national freedom had been won when the 26 County State had been set up and that the nationalist population of the 6 Counties should accept things as they were and settle down to become happy little Britishers.

So secure did both establishments feel in their future tenure of office that Terence O'Neill invited Sean Lemass to visit him at Stormont in January 1965. This visit marked the first step by Fianna Fail to officially recognise the Six Counties as a legitimate State. Coming so soon after the defeat of the IRA campaign in the North when the De Valera and Brookborough governments had been aligned against the IRA. Lemass' visit was recognised by Republicans as the final surrender by Fianna Fail of the national ideal. Their fears were compounded two months later when the Parliamentary Nationalists became Her Majesty's Official Opposition in Stormont; but so weak and disorganised were the IRA at that crucial time the prospects of their preventing the complete implementation of Britain's Imperial policy in Ireland were practically non-existent.

In 1961 when the last internee was released, the total membership of the IRA in Belfast was 24 men, and their total armaments were two servicable short-arms. The position of their Northern units wasn't much better. Yet despite this unfavourable start the role of the IRA in the North in upsetting Britain's plans for Ireland's future was a crucial one and can be traced in chronological sequence from 1963. June 1963 was the 200th Anniversary of the birth of Wolfe Tone, and to commemorate this historic occasion celebrations were arranged throughout the country in all the major centres, including Belfast.

The Wolfe Tone Society took on the job of organising the celebrations in Belfast and they requested the local IRA unit to supply a colour party for the parade from Beechmount Avenue to Casement Park. The route to be taken was 100% Roman Catholic and nationalist, but so strong was the Stormont Government at that time, and so determined were they to crush any further manifestations of Republicanism that they served notice on the Wolfe Tone Committee forbidding them to carry the tri-colour, on the manifestly ridiculous grounds that the display of the tri-colour could lead

to a breach of the peace. A large force of R.U.C. were present at the starting point to enforce the ban and despite the wishes of the Volunteers present the organising committee, by a majority vote, decided that the tri-colour would not be carried.

The then O/C of Belfast, Billy McKee, also ignored the demands of the Volunteers to defy the ban, with the result that the parade to commemorate the Father of Republicanism marched up the Falls Road headed by an IRA colour party minus the tri-colour to the hoots and jeers of derision from a couple of hundred onlookers. The humiliation and embarrassment of the Volunteers was acute and McKee's refusal to sanction the carrying of the tri-colour created bitter resentment among them, and led to his early resignation. The tri-colour was to play a central part in the future developments in Belfast, especially in re-awakening the dormant nationalism that slumbered in the hearts of the people.

In the years previous to 1964 the annual Easter Parade in Belfast had been organised by the National Graves Association. It had been the practice for the parade to assemble at the cemetery gates and to march the short distance to the Republican Plot where the commemorative service was held. Following the debacle of the previous June the Belfast Battalion Staff decided that the IRA would organise the 1964 Easter parade and that the tri-colour would be carried. It was also decided that the parade would commence from Beechmount Avenue and thereby cover the same route that the Wolfe Tone commemoration parade had covered. Preparations were made to defend the colour party against any interference by the RUC. It was significant that a larger crowd of spectators than usual were present that day in the hope, no doubt, to witness or to participate in a Donnybrook, but in the event, no ban was imposed and the parade went off without incident.

However, in Newry, a member of the IRA, was sentenced to three months imprisonment under the notorious Flag and Emblem Act for carrying the tri-colour at the Newry Parade. He had also served 3 months the previous year, 1963, for the same so-called offence.

In October 1964 a general election was held for the British Parliament in which the North of Ireland has twelve seats. The leadership of the Movement decided to contest all twelve seats on the abstentionist ticket. In Belfast, as in all other areas, the task of contesting the election fell on the local units of the IRA. The Republican election head-quarters for the West Belfast constituency was situated in Divis Street in the heart of a Catholic ghetto area. On display in the window of the HQ was a photo-

graph of a very handsome candidate, flanked on one side by the Starry Plough and on the other, by the Tri-colour. Although Stormont's Flag and Emblem Act was designed expressly to prevent the display of Irish Republican emblems in the North, the Stormont authorities did not interfere for some days in Divis Street.

Following threats from Dr. Ian Paisley that if the flag was not removed he and his supporters would march on the HQ and remove it themselves, the police sent a deputation requesting that the flag be removed from the window. Needless to say this request was refused. That night, Wednesday 28th September a large force of police armed with rifles, sten-guns, batons and crowbars arrived at the HQ, smashed down the doors and removed the "offending emblem". The next day, after announcing our intention through the news media, another Tri-colour was placed in the window at twelve noon.

Many hundreds of people gathered to witness developments and after the flag had been replaced they stood solemnly to attention and sang the National Anthem with a solemnity and fervour that I never witnessed before or since.

The police at this time were conspicuous by their absence but some hours later, after most of the crowd had dispersed, they arrived in force, smashed the window and removed the flag for the second time. This gave rise to what were to become known over the world as the Divis Street riots. Several hundreds of people assembled in the area. They were armed with sticks, stones, rotten vegetables, pieces of iron gratings and petrol bombs, and they attacked the police re-enforcements who were sent to disperse them. Vicious rioting ensued which lasted for three days and the battle became world news through the newsmen and television crews who were present to cover the story.

Many casualties were inflicted on both civilians and police and the brutality of the police on those unfortunate enough to fall in their hands coupled with the savage prison sentences imposed by the courts on the rioters, embittered the nationalist population against the Stormont regime, revived all their frustrations and resentment against the Government repression, and set the stage for future confrontations between the youth of the nationalist areas and the RUC.

On the following Sunday 2nd October a massive parade headed by the Tri-colour, flanked by youths with hurley sticks and followed by thousands of defiant, spoiling-for-a-showdown supporters marched from

Beechmount Avenue to Hamill Street where a public meeting was held. But on this occasion, in the face of a formidable show of strength by the people, the police decided that discretion was the better part of valour and remained discreetly out of sight.

The result of the 1964 Election was a trail of lost Republican deposits, a costly demonstration that people with the vote were not willing to vote for abstentionist candidates — that abstentionism was dead, and that it was time to bury the corpse. But the Divis Street riots also demonstrated that there was a groundswell of support for militant Republicanism especially among the younger generation, that the embers of patriotism still smouldered within the people, and that a good strong Republican breeze was all that was required to fan those embers to flames. However, despite the increase in patriotic fervour generated by the riots, the stigma of defeat still clung to the Republican Movement and the only benefit enjoyed by the IRA at the time was the enlistment of a couple dozen of new recruits.

1965 was a fairly uneventful year. The routine work of organising a physical force movement continued, and although the IRA progressed to a degree, it failed to make any impact on the political scene. The Easter parade that year was larger than in previous years and passed without incident, but the increase in the number of people who participated and who turned out to watch, was an indication of the slowly growing national consciousness and spirit of resistance that was developing among the people.

The two major developments of 1965, although at the time no great importance was attached to them, were the formation of the first Republican Club in Belfast, and the attempt by GHQ to establish "one-man, one-vote" committees in the North. Following instructions from Head-quarters an ad hoc committee was formed by members of the Belfast Republican Club, the IRA and members of Cumann na mBan who convened a larger and more representative meeting of as many organisations and political parties as would attend. The purpose of this larger meeting was to form a broadly based "one-man, one-vote" committee, to agitate for the extension of the franchise to everyone over the age of 21. That this committee never got beyond the initial discussion stage was due in large part to the lack of political acumen and awareness among the Belfast IRA who failed to grasp the importance of this move, and also to the intransigence of the Northern Ireland Labour Party who spared no effort to ensure that the committee would never get off the ground. This attempt

by the IRA to establish a broadly based agitationary movement, around a popular demand, was in keeping with their recently adopted policy of involvement in the social problems of the people, and it was the forerunner, to the establishment of the Civil Rights Association, which was to have somewhat better success, a few years later.

April 1966 was the 50th Anniversary of the 1916 Rising and the task of organising a fitting commemoration of this historic event devolved on the local units of the IRA throughout the country. The Belfast staff saw these commemorations as a golden opportunity to drive a coach and four through the notorious Flag and Emblems Act. From January until April the whole resources and energy of the Belfast movement were devoted to preparations for the celebrations.

The services of every member of Cumann na mBan and dozens of other women were enlisted to make thousands of Tri-colour flags and miles of tri-colour buntings and banners, which were distributed throughout all the nationalist areas in Belfast. This, combined with the individual efforts of local committees led to keen competition between streets and areas, to make their own street or area the best decorated in the city. The result was that practically every house in every nationalist area had the Tri-colour or the Starry Plough flying from their window. The streets and roads were festooned from one end to the other, with Tri-coloured bunting and even the curbs and lamp posts were painted green, white and orange. Despite the Flag and Emblem Act, and for the first time in four years the Tri-colour was carried in Newry that year without anyone having to go to prison for the privilege. In fact, to my knowledge no prosecution has been brought against anyone, under that notorious Act since that massive public display of defiance in 1966.

Despite a bitterly cold day, the turnout for the 50th Anniversary celebrations was the largest in living memory. It was estimated that over 12,000 people participated in the march itself, while somewhere in the region of 40,000 people lined the route of the parade which had been extended by over a mile for this special occasion. Two members of the Belfast Battalion Staff, were subsequently sentenced to 3 months imprisonment for their part in organising the commemoration parade but it was generally accepted that this was a small price to pay for the vast return of national fervour which the celebrations had so obviously generated and although no great material benefit accrued to the IRA from this stirring among the people, there was general satisfaction that progress had been made in dispelling the deadening apathy that had immobilised the people for so many years.

Contemporaneously with our involvement in elections and parades the ordinary every day work of organising the IRA was going on. Men were still being recruited, organised into sections, companies and units, and were being trained in the use of arms and explosives.

On the 6th of June 1966, Paisley led a demonstration in Belfast against the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church to protest against its "Romeward trend", and was allowed to proceed through Cromac Square, a predominately Roman Catholic part of the city which had been the scene of sectarian riots in other years. Serious rioting broke out but the procession, protected by the police, finally got through. Police reinforcements returned later to disperse the Catholics who were still standing around after the rioting had simmered down and once again great brutality was used by the RUC against the Nationalist population whom they were determined to teach a lesson. The RUC returned in strength to the area the following night, intent on another night's sport at the expense of the local population but a couple of hand-grenades tossed into a group of them by two Volunteers caused them to beat a hasty retreat and wrote finis to that particular episode.

A couple of weeks later, on the 27th June a gang of men called at the home of a member of the Battalion Staff, but he was not at home. Some hours later at 2 o'clock in the morning in Malvern Street, this same gang shot dead an 18 year old Catholic youth, Peter Ward, and seriously wounded his two companions. Three men, Spence, McClean and Williamson, all members of the UVF, were subsequently charged with murder and sentenced to life imprisonment.

At the latter end of 1966 a unit of the IRA entered St. Gabriel's Boy's School on the Crumlin Road where a British Army recruiting lecture was in progress. They smashed the film projector, being used for the showing of propaganda films, and injured the British Army officers who were conducting the show. This minor action put a stop to similar recruiting drives being conducted in other Catholic schools.

By 1967 we had a total of 5 Republican Clubs in Belfast and strenuous efforts were being made to radicalise our membership who were still very reluctant to discard the traditional physical force role of the IRA and to adopt the unfamiliar role of political activists. Elsewhere in the country the Movement's new policies of social agitation were being implemented. Opposition to the foreign takeover of Irish lands and assets was being mounted, and members of the Movement were active in

the housing problem in Dublin, Cork, Waterford, and other areas, running citizens advice bureaux, harassing foreign landowners and the owners of ground rents, and actively supporting industrial strikes. While the rest of the country was striving towards reality, Belfast dragged its feet. The Belfast Battalion Staff impressed on H. Quarters the necessity for a happy blend of political agitation and military activity. In view of a concerted recruiting drive being undertaken by the British Army at that time, permission was sought and granted for an attack on three British Army training centres - 2 in Belfast and 1 in Lisburn. These three centres were subsequently attacked and extensively damaged by explosive fire-bombs.

But the main event of 1967 was the formation of the Civil Rights Association with "one-man, one-vote" was one of its central demands. The initiative to set up the CRA was taken by the Belfast Wolfe Tone Society and although the initial meetings were attended in strength by members of the Belfast republican movement that the personell of the first Executive Committee could have been completely dictated by their votes, but in order to have as broadly based a committee as possible, only two members of the Republican Movement were elected. I was one of those elected to the first Executive and was also a member of a 3 man sub-committee that drew up the Association's first constitution; myself and other members of the Movement remained on the Executive until internment was introduced.

I mention these facts in order to nail a current falsehood that the IRA has taken over the CRA in recent times, and to demonstrate the positive involvement of the Movement in the CRA since its inception.

After some varied and limited success as a Citizens Advisory Body, and after turning down a Republican request for a protest march in Belfast, the CRA eventually embarked on its first march in August 1968. This march - from Coalisland to Dungannon - was expected to attract 10,000 marchers but in fact only about 2,000 people took part, and including the bulk of the Northern IRA units. The presence of prominent members of the Republican Movement in Coalisland was noted by high-ranking RUC officers of whom a large number were in attendance. This first march of the CRA was halted on the outskirts of Dungannon by a large force of RUC and despite some sporadic stone-throwing, the protest broke up peacefully after a short sit-down on the road and the whole affair ended in a disappointing anti-climax.

Following the march a meeting of Northern Republicans was held in South Derry to analyse the results and the implications of the march and

to plan our strategy for future marches. Derry was the venue chosen for the next protest. Minister of Home Affairs William Craig however, banned the march on the grounds that a breach of the peace might ensue, but the organisers decided to defy the ban and to go ahead with the march. About 400 people, including a busload of Belfast Republicans, turned up for the Derry march.

It is very probable that had the marchers been permitted to proceed without interference that the CRA would have died a quiet and natural death that day as had so many other similar anti-unionist movements before it. Everyone is aware of the outcome of the Oct. 5th march in Derry and how the events of that day led directly to the dramatic developments we are witnessing today, but there are two facts which are not so widely known and which probably played a big part in the over-reaction of the police to the situation. The first "fact" was that the Special Branch had been informed that the IRA intended to use the Oct. 5th march to set Derry ablaze and to create all sorts of havoc in the city that day. Undoubtedly this was one reason why the police were present in such force, why they reacted so violently to the first gentle nudge.

The second factor was that the Belfast Republicans had been instructed, in the event of the parade being halted by police cordons, to push leading Nationalist politicians or any other dignitaries who were sure to be at the head of the parade into the police ranks. This they did to such effect that one became the first casualty of the days of violence, receiving a busted head from a peeler's baton. In the ensuing clash the RUC spared no one. A British M.P. Mrs. Ann Kerr, who had been invited over as an observer, said that the savagery that day was worse than anything she had seen during the Chicago riots a short time previously. The television coverage of the RUC brutality that day exposed the fascist nature of the Orange/Unionist domination and its ruthless denial of elementary democratic rights to a large section of the citizenry.

Hitherto, the Unionists had done much as they wished, because the Westminster Parliament didn't want to hear how the 6 Counties were being ruled. Efforts by the IRA and Sinn Fein in the '40s, the '50s and the '60s, to expose the falsity of the Orange/Unionist democratic front were neutralised when De Valera's government was also seen to be opposed to the Republicans, and Sinn Fein had helped to muzzle itself with a policy of abstention from the Dublin and Westminster Parliaments and their lack of involvement in immediate problems of the people.

But at Derry in October 1968 the Civil Rights Movement and the

violence which took place that day did more in a few hours to rock the tribal Orange/Unionist Establishment, and did more for the minority in the Six Counties than the IRA physical force campaigns had been able to do in fifty years. For the first time the world was given a look at the kind of rule that was fostered under the aegis of the Union Jack in Northern Ireland while at home the people were so incensed and aroused that 15,000 of them marched in a banned parade in Derry the following week.

The Civil Rights Movement became the umbrella organisation which united the many separate organisations that were striving to secure democratic rights for all citizens in the 6 Counties. It exposed in a manner which no other movement could have done the blatant injustices of the Special Powers Act, gerrymandering and discrimination in employment and housing against Catholics and against the poorest class of Protestants who were not members of the Orange Order or of the Unionist Party. O'Neill and the other members of the Unionist cabinet were embarrassed by this publicity but Craig blundered on, stubbornly determined to hammer the protestors to silence.

In January 1969 a People's Democracy march from Belfast to Derry was attacked at Burntollet Bridge while the RUC stood looking on. Members of the "B" Specials took part in this attack, with the knowledge and approval, no doubt, of William Craig. On the 20th April following rioting in Derry, the RUC forced their way into the Bogside, causing widespread damage to property in the Catholic areas and assaulting Samuel Devenny, inflicting such serious injuries on him that he subsequently died on the 17th July. In an effort to draw off the large force of police who were laying siege to the Bogside the Belfast units of the IRA set fire to and destroyed 10 post offices throughout the city.

By 1969 the total membership of the Belfast IRA was approximately 120 men and their armaments had increased to a grand total of 24 weapons most of which were short range pistols. Strenuous efforts had been made by the Belfast leadership over the previous years to politicise the Volunteers, to encourage them to join the Republican Clubs and to become involved in political agitations, but in this we were only partly successful. Our membership of the CRA was such that we still exercised considerable influence on the elections to the Executive Committee and a number of our members were active in Republican Clubs, Tenants' associations, housing action committees and trade union groups. Through our involvement in these committees we were gradually building a nucleus of support among the people, and contact had been made with the

Shankill Re-development Committee with whom we had meetings to discuss common problems in the housing field.

Joe McCann, ar dheis De go raibh a anam, was one of our most active members on the social agitation front and was also a courageous and competent leader, where and when military action was required to back up the people's demands and his example of complete involvement in all aspects of the revolution contributed to a large extent in winning many of the younger volunteers away from their purely physical force commitments.

During May and June 1969 the RUC made vicious attacks on the people of Ardoyne and Unity Flats and heavy pressure was being exerted on the Belfast Battalion Staff to introduce weapons into the situation. This we were reluctant to do as we realised that the meagre armaments at our disposal were hopelessly inadequate to meet the requirements of the situation and that the use of firearms by us would only serve to justify the use of greater force against the people by the forces of the Establishment and increase the danger of sectarian pogroms.

On August 12th the Apprentice Boys' march in Derry collapsed into an escalating riot that ripped the city apart. The Bogside sealed itself off in a state of siege defending Free Derry from the RUC, "B" Specials and the Orange mobs. Stormont had mobilised the "B" Specials and on August 14th they clashed with a crowd in Divis Street who were demonstrating against the police siege of the Bogside. In Leeson Street a group of marauding policemen were dispersed by a volley of revolver shots and a hand grenade which injured an RUC sergeant.

The North then deteriorated into widespread violence and arson. In Belfast on the night of August 14th six people were shot dead. Derry was quiet but Belfast had gun battles raging on the Falls Road and by August 16th 420 people had been treated in hospital, 108 for gun shot wounds, 150 houses had been destroyed by fire and hundreds of families forced to evacuate their homes. The Protestant mobs seemed determined to break their way into the Catholic districts alongside the RUC and the "B" Specials. Barricades were erected at strategic points and at all entrances to the Catholic areas; and the people turned to the IRA for leadership and defence.

The membership of the IRA was inflated by the influx of hundreds of recruits and the Republican Movement enjoyed a popularity among the people that it had never experienced before. It was this popularity and the

support of the people that created the conditions which brought so many disgruntled and ex-members of the IRA out into the open again and which led to the establishment of the Provisionals. To deal with this development would require another lecture, so I will finish there.

Title: The Role of the IRA, 1962-1967

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