A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE PERCEPTION OF THE RIC DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD: A WEST CORK FOCUS

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'History-writing is a way of getting rid of the past.'
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe[1]

Goethe's quote was never so apt as when applied to the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). In the primary and secondary schools' educational literature, we find little or no reference to the RIC.[2] The force was active for 100 years from 1822 to 1922; yet, it barely merits any discussion in the classrooms of Ireland. Why has this major institution been written out of the educational literature? In fact, there has been little recent scholarly debate on the RIC, besides Diarmaid Kingston's 2013 *Beleaguered*.[3] The following paper is somewhat revisionist and intends to examine how history-writing is a way of getting rid of the past – in this case, the RIC's involvement in an embarrassing chapter of Ireland's colonial history. Major questions must be asked. Firstly, was the RIC ever a respected and integrated part of the Irish community? Secondly, how was

its reputation damaged by its involvement in the War of Independence and by the influx of the RIC Reserve Force (Black and Tans) and the Auxiliary Division of the RIC (Auxiliaries or Auxies) into the police force?

John D. Brewer claimed that the dominant portrayal of the RIC in academic literature was as a colonial police force suppressing the nationalist population.[4] In my own research, I found this to be true. But is that portrayal accurate? A perspective, that has long held sway, is that the RIC were part of the problem in Ireland's fight for independence – in short, a colonial police force that suppressed a majority nationalist population. O'Hegarty, writing in the 1950s, claimed that the 'RIC was an institution, loyal to England, [which] terrorised the people and when they [the RIC] were broken, her grip on Ireland was broken with them'.[5] At around the same time, Paiaras Béaslaí penned a very damning indictment: 'The most essential element of the British system of governing and oppressing Ireland was the force known as the Royal Irish Constabulary'.[6] Furthermore, Béaslaí attempted to erase 100 years of policing history when he asserted that 'The RIC were never policemen in the proper sense of the term'.[7] Similarly, Tom Barry recalled how the 'RIC and Black and Tans as a force were detested by the masses of the people and had committed many atrocities in West Cork'.[8] These statements reinforce the common stereotype of a force that suppressed the local communities where they worked. These concepts were popularised by the heroic, but rather subjective, War of Independence literature which emerged during the development of the new Irish state. This type of historical literature was in vogue for many decades after the Civil War; it provided a narrow and one-sided view of events.

In contrast to those perceptions, Arthur Griffin founder of *Sinn Féin*, the very organ that helped bring about the destruction of the RIC, painted the policemen in a very favourable light. Some years before the War of Independence and before the arrival of the Black and Tans, he stated:

> The RIC is a fine body of men, recruited from the Irish people. The typically young constabulary is Irish, Catholic, Nationalist, son of decent parents, his father a Home Ruler, his uncle a patriot priest. The young constabulary man subscribe liberally to the RC Church. He

> is smiled on by the Irish clergy, by Irish girls and is respected by the young fellow of the street corner and country cross roads.[9]

Griffin was not alone in his respect for individual members of the RIC. Michael Collins also felt an affinity with them. He told former RIC-turned-Irish Republican Army (IRA) man Jeremiah Mee that 'He could not hurt a member of the RIC without hurting a great many of one's best friends'.[10] One of Cork's most famous literary sons and republicans, Seán Ó Faoláin, wrote how his father, a member of the RIC, taught him and his brothers to be proud of the Union. His brothers told him in later years that 'they felt a little embarrassed – two loyalties, to the Empire and Ireland, conflicting'.[11] He recounted how his father 'was absolutely loyal to the Empire … and what's more he respected the values and conventions of what we nowadays call the Establishment'.[12] So where does the truth lie? Was the RIC respected or reviled by the majority?

Irish society was politically dominated by the aristocracy and British elite; this gave them a strong influence over the police force. The RIC's paymasters were the policy makers of Westminster and they called the tune. Though the ranks of the common constabulary were swelled by rural Catholic candidates, the officer classes were dominated by the Protestant loyalist class.[13] John Regan, one of a minority of Catholics who became an officer and who served in Bantry during the War of Independence, commented, in his memoir, that the officer class mixed exclusively with higher society.[14] This was typical of so many of the officer class, whether Catholic or Protestant; this created a perception of a force existing only for the benefit of one stratum of society consequently estranging them from the rest. As part of his duty as a constable, Jeremiah Mee, for four months, provided protection for a landlady, Mrs Brown, during a period of land agitation. The agitators were desperate and despondent; they could clearly see the inequity of wealth and the unfairness of life. Mee admitted that 'One can see how the RIC was seen as representing the other side'.[15] The Protection of Persons and Property Act in 1881 gave the RIC the power 'to apprehend anyone suspected of violence and intimidation … and to hold in custody without trial'.[16] The eviction of tenants was always done under the watchful eye of, or with force from, the RIC.

By 1901, Ireland was twice as heavily policed as England, and so the perception of a garrisoned country rang true. It peaked at 12,358 before settling down to 10,000 with 1400 barracks, posts and huts nationwide.[17] In Cork's West Riding there were 250 RIC and 40 barracks.[18] In 1937, at a time of nationalist zest, Dorothy MacCadle argued that 'every village in Ireland had an RIC barracks, so British administration placed its chief reliance on the flawless system of espionage carried out by the RIC'.[19] All of these factors contributed to the view that the law served only one side of the community; this is not dissimilar to the view of the RUC among Catholic communities in Northern Ireland.

Bandon offers a microcosm of that perception. Often seen as a Protestant loyalist stronghold, Bandon was at the centre of Cork's West Riding and, thus, was a heavily barracked town. The *Bandon Town Commissioner Minutes* give us an insight into how the force was viewed. The annual Manchester Martyrs commemoration – to remember those who were executed for their part in the 1867 Fenian uprising – was particularly poignant and dear to the nationalist community in the town because one of the martyrs, Philip Allen, once lived in Bandon. When RIC presence was increased in Bandon in November 1887, those involved in the commemoration were infuriated. The Town Commissioners echoed these sentiments and passed a resolution: 'That we protest in the strongest manner against the invasion of our peaceable town by armed forces in support of an arbitrary proclamation forbidding the annual commemoration of the Manchester Martyrs'.[20] In 1889, once again during the Bandon Manchester Martyrs commemoration, the crowd were met with 'police armed with swords and batons … who charged the procession but retired after several losses'.[21] Again in 1893 the minute book recorded that there were '2000 people present … with a big police presence'.[22] Therefore, with regards to nationalist parading in Bandon, Mee's assertion that the RIC was seen as representing only one side appears to be true.

Yet can we assess the RIC under such narrow parameters? Is it too simplistic to assert that all members of the RIC were loyalist and did not share the nationalist ideals of their fellow countrymen? Irishmen joined the RIC for a variety of reasons. For some, there was little chance of social advancement in rural Ireland but the RIC offered this chance. For others, it was simply

an attractive, well-paid job that gave them and their families a decent living. More again were following a family tradition. In this regard, having a family member in the RIC often made it easier to gain entry. While the RIC was the arm of British law in Ireland, many of the individuals in the force were not immune to the sufferings and politics of the revolutionary period. Many policemen could not and did not condone the atrocities that were taking place at that time.

During the lead up to the 1916 Rising, the RIC in Clonakilty observed the Lyre Volunteers' parade. On 5 May 1916, the RIC arrested some key volunteers, including Jim Walsh and John and Tim Crowley.[23] In contrast, there were no arrests of the Lyre Company in the Ballineen RIC district. On more than one occasion, the police stationed in Ballineen sent word to the families of members of the Volunteers warning them of impending raids.[24] In Bandon, during the War of Independence, two members of the RIC refused to fire on the house of Seán Hales, O/C[25] of the Bandon Battalion, and resigned from the force.[26] On 13 March 1920, the *Cork Examiner* ran a story about the resignation of three members of the RIC who were brothers from Ballineen. It stated that the resignations were due 'to the treatment of fellow countrymen by the government'.[27] Tom Barry paid a significant compliment to the RIC men in his own locality when he stated that the Rosscarbery garrison 'had not killed or wounded a single citizen nor burned houses or effected any arrests. They were unique in that respect'.[28] Ex-RIC constable John Sullivan said that before 'the Troubles … relations were very good between the people and the police'.[29] He suggests that 'the Troubles' caused the real rift between the RIC and the Irish people. Contrary to the views of some historians mentioned in this paper – such as Hegarty, Béaslaí and MacCadle – what emerges is far from a black and white divide between the RIC and the communities where they worked.

Ostracism, attack and intimidation all forced resignations from the RIC during the revolutionary period. It would be naive and simplistic to suggest that all members of the RIC should have, simply, laid down arms against their fellow Irishmen. This did not happen in the majority of cases and it did not happen during the 1916 Easter Rising when Irishmen, employed in the services of the British Army, fired on the Irish revolutionaries. For those who

Fig. 1: RIC barracks on Barrack Hill (now MacCurtain Hill), Clonakilty, n.d. Postcard published by E. C. Dawson, Bandon. Image courtesy of Maurice McCarthy.

Fig. 2: RIC officers on patrol, accompanied by soldiers in the Essex Regiment, beside the RIC barracks, on Barrack Hill (now MacCurtain Hill), Clonakilty, c. 1920. Photo courtesy of Maurice McCarthy.

left the RIC, employment was not plentiful and obviously social welfare was not yet in existence; these factors made resignation, no matter how principled in theory, often an impractical decision. Mee despondently commented on the lack of care or help for RIC men that were brave enough to resign because of their loyalty to Ireland. He reported that 'There was a total failure to provide employment for ex-RIC men'.[30]

A case could be made that during the revolutionary period, RIC men were all tarnished with the same brush and, in many cases, were marked men by association with the force. This was another factor that made leaving the RIC difficult. There are examples of shootings of off-duty RIC men. Sergeant O'Donoghue was shot dead on 17 November 1920 in Cork City, while walking home. The papers wrote that he was a safe target, a 'harmless unoffending man'.[31] To defend or speak favourably of the RIC was unacceptable, especially in the context of what was happening in Cork. Peter Hart stated that on more than one dead body was found a note attached to it saying, 'This is the penalty for all those who associate with ... the RIC'.[32] In the monthly RIC reports, we are informed that Mrs Johnson had her house, in Kilbrittain, attacked by the local IRA in an attempt to force her from the area. The report added, 'Mrs. Johnson who is the widow of an ex-policeman and a Protestant and her four children have been very friendly with the police at Kilbrittain'.[33] Thus, this demonstrates that there was a price to pay for having a relationship with 'the enemy'.

The Roman Catholic Church had a powerful influence on people's mind-sets; it spoke out against the brutality inflicted by the police and military upon the local communities. But what is seldom discussed is the fact that the Church also condemned the IRA for the murder of policemen at the beginning of the War of Independence.[34] Cardinal Logue announced that 'It is an act of murder to lie behind a wall when a policeman goes for an ounce of tobacco and to shoot him'.[35] In a pamphlet which addressed the IRA, Logue repeated the decree of ex-communication set by the Bishop of Cork. John Regan, recalling his time in Bantry, said that some priests actually spoke up from the altar for the RIC.[36] Here was a powerful and influential body, the Catholic Church, condemning those who murdered the RIC. This is all the more significant given that the populist figure of Éamon de Valera swayed many a community's perception of

the RIC when he described them in pejorative terms using phrases like 'brutal treason' and stating that they 'occupied a vile position'.[37]

The papers too continued to show sympathy for the RIC killed in 1921. The *Cork Constitution*, often regarded as a loyalist paper, reflected a sizeable minority of people in Cork who were abhorred by the killings. In January 1921, the paper carried a story about the ambushing of Constable Shorthall at Parnell Bridge in Cork City; it stated, 'the deepest sympathy is extended to his widow … on her inexpressible sad bereavement'.[38] On 1 February 1921, the same paper carried a story of an engagement in Cork: 'a small band of RIC men fought with such tenacity [against the IRA], that the results show the spirit of these men is unconquerable'.[39] Understandably, the *Cork Constitution* was aware of its predominantly loyalist readership who supported the RIC's stance against the IRA and, therefore, penned a positive view of the police force. This is the kind of pride and representation that is, naturally, never found in the republican War of Independence memoirs which informed a generation's opinion of the RIC.

It can be argued that it was the merging of the 'old RIC' with the Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries that ultimately destroyed the reputation of the RIC. Even in the thick of the War of Independence, the Cork newspapers made this distinction between the old RIC and the new units. The *Cork Examiner* was littered with headlines announcing the arrival and reinforcement of the RIC with 'Imported Police', 'Auxiliary Police' and 'English Police'. Clearly, this was a deliberate demarcation between the new recruits and the local RIC. Similarly, the *Cork Constitution* used terms such as 'Ordinary Police' or 'English Police'.[40] In a reference to the burning of Cork City on 11/12 December 1920, the *Cork Examiner* stated, 'The old RIC men [as distinct from the Black and Tans] were mainly engaged in conveying to the fire brigade information of further outbreaks from time to time during the night'.[41] There is also evidence of the RIC baton-charging British soldiers who were fighting Cork men.[42] Clearly, this shows that publically the RIC was considered distinct from the other military organs of British occupation: the Army, the Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries.

However, at some stage there was a merging of identities in the eyes of the onlookers and, perhaps, a turning point for the RIC in West Cork. The

shocking murders near Dunmanway in 1920 highlighted this change. The killing of Canon Magner and Mr Crowley by Cadet Brady of the Essex Regiment was a heinous crime carried out in cold blood. It shocked both the Catholic and Protestant communities. Reacting to the event, an article in the *Cork Examiner* on 17 December 1920 stated that the Bishop of Cork received a message of sympathy from the Inspector General. His Lordship replied, 'I should accept sympathy from the Inspector General of the old RIC but the verbal sympathy of an Inspector General, whose men are murdering my people and have burned my city, I cannot accept'.[43] Earlier that year, Bishop Cohalan wrote that 'Bishops [should] tell police that they are not bound in conscience to perform the many acts of coercion which are goading the people beyond restraint'.[44] Evidently by 1920, there was a condemnation of all police forces under the general flagship of the RIC.

In Cork, what blackened the RIC more than anything else was the murder of Lord Mayor, Thomas McCurtain. On 17 April 1921, the jury for the case met to give their verdict. Coroner McCabe read the document aloud to a hushed courtroom. The unanimous verdict read, 'The murder was organised and carried out by the Royal Irish Constabulary ... and officially directed by the British Government'.[45] This was a crushing blow to any positive perception of the RIC by the people of Cork.

When the RIC was eventually disbanded in May 1922, the Chief Secretary of Ireland, Sir Hamar Greenwood, delivered a speech to the House of Commons in which he said that he:

> wished to pay tribute to a force which he described as one of the oldest and finest bodies of policemen in the world … he thought they were the pick of the Irish race. They brought with them the perfect physique, a fine spirit, sober and thrifty habits an asset to Ireland … Nearly all of them sons of farmers, some farmers themselves … they never flinched in their devotion to duty.[46]

Prime Minister Asquith added that they were 'recruited from all sectors of the Irish people, they had never failed in carrying out their duties'.[47]

Conclusion

Is it time to revisit the role of the RIC in Ireland? In an interesting parallel, Ireland's role in World War I – and its honouring of the men and women who served in the British forces during that period – is now being revised. For too long their achievements had been deliberately forgotten, suppressed and effaced. Irish people are beginning to re-examine Irish history in a broader context than the conventional nationalist view that too often was the dominant theme in the classrooms for generations. This paper hopes to be a stepping stone for those who wish to re-examine the RIC's role within Irish history.

(Endnotes)

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