

Decade of Centenaries Secondary School Writing Competition



Winning Entries 2023 Junior Cycle

Breaking The Habit

Tradition, it's the reason my name is Mary, the same as my mother and her mother and her mother before her and so on since God created our family. Tradition is also the reason I'm a nun. Tradition is nice in some senses, but I think we should live our own lives, break the habit if you will.

The word came first in a letter from my sister, who at the time was living in Ballytrain. The letter went as follows:

Tues 17th Feb 1920

My dearest sister Mary,

How are you keeping? I am fine. The boys are good.

I am writing to tell you about the events that unfolded this past Sunday around 2 in the morning. I was outside, unable to sleep with worry of this war. I just happened to look down the road.

Everything looked normal, the RIC men were going in and out of the barracks, probably changing shift. Perhaps there was more activity in the surrounding area but nothing major that would have hinted at what happened next.

Out of seemingly nowhere someone opened fire. The RIC men shot back and that went on and on and on. Over and back. IRA and RIC fighting and fighting until soon it was three hours later. There was shouting, orders being given.

At this point the boys were out of bed. I was too frightened to move. Pauric was trying to get them back into the house, but the boys watched on like it was some game.

IRA men emerged and planted explosives around the walls of the barracks. I watched in absolute horror as the men ran. The fuse was lit and in mere seconds the barracks was blown to smithereens. Paper and slates everywhere. What frightened me even more was that the RIC men were still in there, buried under the rubble.

Later on they were moved to Carrickmacross to the hospital. Honestly I'll be surprised if you didn't hear. There was such a commotion.

I was so scared Mary. And our little brother. What to make of the young fella I don't know anymore. In the beginning I thought he was right that the IRA were good but I'm beginning to question that now. Blood was shed Mary. Think of the families. What if those men had children? The poor creatures, probably scared out of their minds. It's left me awful shook.

Say a prayer for the families, Mary, and the whole Ballytrain community. It's hit us all hard. Such violence so close to home. What has the world come to?

All my love and best wishes,

Sinead O'Dowd

I didn't believe it at first, Sinead was forever pulling my leg.

Whether I believed it or not, soon the Black and Tans were occupying Carrickmacross. I rarely left the convent in fear that the Tans would know who I was, well rather who my brother was.

One Friday night I awoke, a feeling of dread filling me up. I could never explain what brought it on, perhaps it was because of the funeral of Sister Agnes, but I just knew that something was wrong. I decided to go for a walk, maybe to the oratory or church.

I climbed out of bed and got dressed quickly into the habit I had worn to the funeral earlier that day. I crept down the stairs, trying my hardest not to disturb the other nuns.

On my way past one of the windows I spied a dark shadow of a man, then another and another. The moonlight reflected on something that each of the shadows held. On something metal. On something that looked exceptionally like a rifle.

Ever since I joined the nunnery I carved adventure, perhaps that's why I done what I did.

I pushed open the door and stormed out into the night. I stood in the cold yard.

I was greeted by several men, rifles in hands and all wearing trench coats and boots. Of course, I knew who these men were, my sister had spoken of them in her letter.

"What do you all think you're doing here, at this hour in the night?" I asked shrilly, pulling myself up to my full height. The IRA men turned to face me. "Ah look, it's a wee nun," the man closest to me sneered. I narrowed my eyes at him as the other men chuckled.

"You should all be ashamed of yourselves," I told them fiercely. "Should we now?" the same man asked. "You should indeed, dragging such evil onto the grounds of a convent," I snapped. "I don't care what sinister business you are up to, but you cannot do it here!" "We'll do our 'sinister business' wherever we please!" he told me, a malicious grin spreading across his face, his rifle hanging menacingly by his side. "You listen to me now-!" I snarled but I was cut off by someone calling my name.

"Mary?"

I turned sharply at the sound of such a familiar voice. There, stopped halfway up the hill from the graveyard was a tall young man, wearing a dark trench coat and boots. A pistol was shoved in his belt, and he held a rifle limply by his side.

"Tis yourself, is it?" he called. "Tomás?" I asked, my voice cracking at the sight of him.

"Who's your one O'Dowd?" the man who had mocked me asked. Tomás ignored him.

I ran down to him, habit billowing around me as I flew towards him. He opened his arms for a hug, a grin painted on his face. Instead, I smacked him as hard as I could across the mouth.

“Care to explain what these men are doing here? Or more to the point, what are you doing with these fellas?” I asked furiously. “Mary, I-” but he was interrupted by one of the men, “take your positions.”

“Away with ya, sister,” one of the men said. “Ya needn’t be getting caught up in all this.”

I turned to my little brother. “Tomás,” I breathed, “there’s no need. Get them to call it off! We need no violence!” I begged him but he shook his head, “I’m sorry Mary, I can’t I have no power.”

An explosion went off somewhere up the main street and the men froze. I turned and looked up the street at the burning rubble where the RIC barracks was.

“O’Dowd, c’mon,” one of the men snapped quietly. Tomás hesitated for a moment. “O’Dowd,” he said warningly.

He took my arm and dragged me to the battlements with him. “Tomás!” I snapped, “what are you doing?” He pressed his finger to his lips and shoved his rifle into my chest. “What are you-?” “Don’t be a dry arse Mary,” he teased. Refusing to take an insult from him I took the rifle and copied the example of the men around me.

A single shot echoed through the town. It was followed by a deafening torrent of gunfire loud enough to wake poor old Sister Agnes from her eternal slumber.

As I stood in the dark, looking out over the street, rifle in hand, I thought to myself about how odd this was. I was nun, fighting alongside the IRA.

I truly had broken the habit.

The 1919 -1922 Monaghan War of Independence

The burning of Roslea and the rescue of Matt Fitzpatrick

In February 1921, in the small village of Roslea, situated on the border between the north and south of Ireland, the residents witnessed a night that will never be forgotten. A well-organized IRA unit under the leadership of Eoin O'Duffy, believed they often fell victim to the local police force, the Royal Irish Constabulary, who served as the law enforcement in Ireland. Another local force the B-Specials [a protestant force who supported the British rule of Ireland] allegedly harassed some young Catholic boys from the locality whom they suspected were carrying dispatches for the IRA. Local IRA units often sought revenge, which resulted in the areas hostile and dangerous environment.

The border had major implications for the people along the border region. Families and friends were separated and every simple task took a new dimension. Protestants in the area viewed the B-Specials as their protectors against the IRA. Eoin O'Duffy, the leader of the Monaghan brigade of the Irish Republican Army [IRA] viewed the actions of the B-Specials as an outrage and demanded retaliation, so he ordered IRA men to execute a member of the B-Specials, a protestant trader named George Lester. George Lester was shot as he opened his shop in the village. Lester's brother fired at the IRA as they retreated from the village. George survived the incident. According to the Irish times on February 23rd, 1921 "three disguised men" carried out the attack. This incident started the chain of events which led to the "Burning of Roslea."

The B-Specials were furious about the attempted assassination of their comrade and in retaliation the B-Specials and UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force] descended on Roslea. The constables commandeered Mr. James Flynn, the owner of the local hotel to clear out. Weapons were located in many nationalist homes. They attacked the parochial house and burnt ten nationalist owned homes. The first house set on fire was the home of Philip Treanor which was completely burned out. Matthew Finnegan's fine drapery establishment suffered a similar fate. The people of Roslea gathered as many of their belongings as they could, and they fled the inferno that was engulfing their village. Fortunately, only one person died in the attack, a man named Finnegan, who was shot while trying to break down a door with the butt of his gun, this caused the gun to discharge, causing his own death. The Archbishop of Canterbury, in the House of Lords in London condemned all actions and reprisals.

Eoin O'Duffy was furious at the B-Specials for this attack on members of the public and viewed the action as despicable. In response to this, Eoin O'Duffy contacted Michael Collins, the leader of the IRA, based in the IRA headquarters in Dublin and requested permission to retaliate against this perceived war crime, as bearing in mind at the time of the incident the Irish Republican army believed they were at war with the British Empire who they perceived illegally occupied Ireland. O'Duffy organized a meeting in Boyles of Derryheanish to plan, he strongly believed that an orange house should be burnt for each Catholic house burnt as a reprisal. A decision was made to retaliate against specific men who they believed took part. Some men at the meeting were reluctant to act, including Frank Aiken. On hearing this O'Duffy stated 'when

you hit them hard, they will not strike again', Aiken responded by stating 'well burn them and their houses'.

In March 1921, the IRA marched into Roslea and began to set many protestant homes and businesses on fire. On the night of the 21st everyone was given a role and each party consisted of seven or eight men, battalions travelled from Clones, Scotstown and Monaghan to partake in the attack, which were scheduled to commence at midnight. Roslea Company supplied scouts to aid the IRA. Unionists believed this was a sectarian attack. Up to 16 homes of members of the B-Specials were targeted and three unionists were killed. George Lunt recalls how his grand-father was shot due his involvement in the local Orange and Black lodge The result of this was an all-out conflict between the IRA and the B-Specials. O'Duffy achieved his aim making the RIC and unionists aware of the IRA strength, efficiency and determination to hold onto their homeland.

During this conflict, an IRA general by the name of Matt Fitzpatrick was shot in the left side and right forearm. For a time he was moved from one safe house to another before eventually being captured by the B-Specials near Newbliss. He was then moved to the Monaghan infirmary, formerly a goal. He was held under armed police guards of the Kings' Royal Rifles. The infirmary was surrounded by a ten-foot-high wall and the only way to get inside was through the main gate which was located off a side street close to the polices barracks and courthouse. During this incarnation, Matt Fitzpatrick was sentenced to the death penalty and to be remanded in the Monaghan Infirmary until he was sent to be hanged.

O'Duffy believed that Fitzpatrick was far too good of a general to lose to the gallows and so, the plan to break out Matt Fitzpatrick began. Rescue plans were formulated, master minded by Dan Hogan. The matron and gateman were encouraged to disclose the routine movements of guards and to leave the doors unlocked. It began on the night of March 29th, 1921, roads were blocked bar the main road to Clogher which passed through Bragan mountain, an easy location to run and hide. The IRA borrowed three cars from people in the area. They parked two cars near the infirmary. They turned off the engine of the third car, took off their boots and as silently as possible they pushed the car up to the infirmary, with John McKenna on the wheel.

The architects of this daring plan also brought a priest with them, predicting that a member may be gravely wounded, the priest could deliver their last rights. The IRA entered and met a guard, a fight broke out, during which a shot was fired which alerted the guards in the vicinity. A running fight now broke out. The IRA got to Fitzpatrick's cell where two guards were stationed. As the story goes, one guard wanted to shoot Fitzpatrick, while the other did not out of fear of retaliation. Arms and ammunition of the military guard was collected, while at the same time the IRA reassured civilian patients and staff that no harm would be done against them. The IRA got past the guards and broke out Fitzpatrick.

The successful escape took approximately fifteen minutes and there were no casualties on either side. After the escape Fitzpatrick was moved from house to house in the locality until he made a full recovery. Matt Fitzpatrick continued to fight against what he believed was the injustice occupation of Northern Ireland and subsequently died on February 11th,

1922, in Clones Co. Monaghan following a gun battle with Specials at the railway station.

So, in conclusion this dark and grim time for the border counties remains controversial for many residents today, but the story of Matt Fitzpatrick is undoubtedly one of the most interesting parts of the conflict. For some including Colm Lynagh, a former republican prisoner who spoke at the Fitzpatrick commemoration, Matt was brave and displayed heroic actions, who gave his life for his country.

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By Sean Boyle, 2nd year, Largy College

Corduff company

A report by Benny Walsh

Company of the national volunteers formed by P.J O'Daly in 1913. Trained by Conlon and Ward two ex-soldiers of the British army. In 1915 this company became a company of the Irish volunteers.

I worked with Doctor Byrne Corduff, and drove his car. He was an intimate friend of all the priests around (note by L. M Dr Byrne was for some years a student in Maynooth College). Archdeacon McKenna and rather Meenan were the leading figures in the movement in Carrickmacross. They were very friendly with Pearse and O'Rahilly. It was they who invited Pearse to address the monster meeting in Carrick on 17th November 1915 - the Manchester Martyrs meeting. The Corduff company marched into this meeting armed (Note by L. M as a little boy I remember seeing this company on their way into Carrick, they were armed with pikes and hurley sticks). Pearse ended his speech with these words: "There will be no peace until the enemy is crushed and the tyrant falls."

I drove Father Meenan and Doctor Byrne to Dublin to collect rifles. It was the day of O'Donovan Rossa's funeral. I don't remember if they attended the funeral, most probably they did. I collected two rifles, a Mauser and a 22, in a garage in the street that is now called Pearse St. Father Meenan collected a parcel of rifles for the Carrick company.

Our two rifles were kept in Dr. Byrne's. there was no ammo, for the Mauser. The 22 was used for practice. The police took both rifles after 1916. Burke and Willie Loughran were the leading men in the Carrick Company. Burke was an excise officer and lost his job after 1916. Loughran was the butler in O'Neill's hotel. Miss Higgins, a music teacher in Carrick convent was the dispatch carrier between H.Q and Carrick. She lodged in O'Neill's hotel. One day the Police raided the hotel looking for her. I was there at the time. I knew that Miss Higgins was then in the priest's house, so I went over and warned her not to return to the hotel. It was she that brought all the details of the rising to the Carrick company. The Carrick company with the other companies were to march to join the Dundalk contingent. The Corduff company were ordered by P.J O'Daly to keep themselves in readiness. A man came from Dublin with MacNeill's countermanding order. Later word came that the Rebellion was The Archdeacon and Father Meenan advised that, because of the confusion, it was better not to move but to wait for further instructions.

Jimmy Ward's account

I remember a fair-day in Carrick, during the fair Roger Casement and Father Meenan walked through the town, everyone said that they were the two finest looking men seen in Carrick for a long time. After his return from prison P.J. O'Daly reorganised the Corduff company in 1917. Ryan was then the butler in O'Neill's hotel, he often came to Corduff to drill and lecture us, he was a Fianna boy.

Sometime in 1919 Benny Walsh, Packey Callan, Luke Cassidy and I went to Bawn to raid the houses of Ulster Volunteers for arms. P.J. O'Daly was to be with us but didn't turn up. Dr. Daly a native of Blayney drove the car. It was a local fair -day. We raided Tennisons, foxs (Cortubber), Irwin's and another house I don't remember. Johnny Marron, a postman in bawn showed us the houses. We got several rifles, shotguns and ammunition. In tensions we got the arms, 4 rifles and a lovely shotgun in the cellar.

General raid for arms I was with Phil Marron (big Phil) Barney Marron and some from Referagh. At McCaul's house , McCaul fired at us from a window, we took cover at the -gable. Barney Marron moved out to fire at the window, McCaul fired first and shot Barney. As Barney fell Phil Marron caught him in his arms, he called for a priest, I went for Corduff for Father McCaffrey, but when the priest came Barney was dead. On that night when the volunteers tried to raid White's of Shanco Miss White fired on them from an upstairs window and slightly wounded Owen Finnegan.

An attack was planned to take place in Carrick on the Tans, Packey Hanratty told Mrs Dr. Byrne about it, she told Father McCaffrey he told Dean Keown who went to the D.I and arranged that the garrison would be kept indoors that night. Packey Hanratty was court-martialed for this and sentenced to death. O'Duffy was very angry that the sentence was not carried out. Hanratty left the country and never returned. The Corduffs company's supply of arms, at least much of it was given to the flying column and this was lost when the column was surrounded and narrowly escaped at Garrybawn, Latton.

Mick Ward's Account

Attack on Carrick barracks. I was in Daly's shop. Others there were Peter McKettrick, Mick fox, Red Daly, J ohhny Connolly, Phil Marron and Dan Hogan. I dont remember seeing Tom Carragher there. We pulled out the fireplace, placed the charge and then piled bags of cement on top of it. A shot came in through the window and lodged in the ceiling. I got the impression that Hogan panicked after this. He ordered us out. (Note by L. M It is strange that several from the fifth batalion area (Carrickmacross) spoke very critically of slogan, while in all the other areas everyone prised his courage and thoroughness very highly.)



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Sworn friends

Wind swept around the yard, just outside Latton on a cold February night, the moon illuminating the night's sky. The chilly, brisk weather contrasted with the upbeat excitement of the men gathered in the yard. They were aware of the task ahead of them, but a quiet confidence was to be seen. Peter Murphy glanced up and shared a knowing look with his lifelong best friend Jack O'Connell. This was a look both men were well accustomed to in the past few years. Everybody knew about the look and understood it was something between both men. What they were unsure of was its origin and what it meant. Only both men knew of its significance.

Murphy and O'Connell had known each other since they were knee height, living two doors away from each other. They spent much of their youth on long days away from home fishing together. The boys had sworn they would be friends forever, best friends to be exact. On these fishing trips the boys frequently met an elderly man by the name of Seamus, who they were enthralled by. Seamus told stories of the beauty of the 'Emerald Isle' and how it broke his heart to see the British ruling over Ireland. "An Irish man guided by other Irish men should rule this country," Seamus would often proclaim. This idea was so ingrained into the boys' minds, they almost felt a duty to Seamus to one day make it a reality. When rumour of an Irish revolution met the boys' ears, both were adamant they would play a part. Both men joined the Irish Volunteers under Padraic Pearse. The idea of fighting for their country appealed to the men, especially alongside a best friend. Peter and Jack had promised one another that above all else they would protect each other and one day they would sit together in an Irish Republic.

During the Rising the men were stationed in Jacob's Biscuit Factory where they kept a watchful eye on one another. On separate occasions the pair had been able to save one another's lives as Jack called out a sniper allowing Peter to duck quickly, and as Peter took out two English soldiers putting Jack under heavy fire the eve before surrender. After each incident the men shared thanks and a knowing look. A look which would come to symbolise their friendship.

Peter and Jack were split up as Irish rebels were sent to prison. Both men's idea of nationalism was heightened however in these prisons, and both returned home to Monaghan with a renewed ambition and an awareness of the magnitude of the job overthrowing British rule would be.

"Stand to attention men! Today we strike against the British army himself. We get in, take our loot and get out." General O'Duffy boomed out to the men. The wind crept in and about the men bringing a shiver which shook the rifles in their hands. The men began to take off towards the RIC Barracks in Ballytrain, about 2 miles of a walk. They crept carefully along the roadsides, keen not to disturb the night's peace. A disturbed villager could easily lead to alerting the RIC. The plan laid ahead of them was simple and the sheer number of men meant little complications would face them. "New style of fighting this," Jack whispered to Peter. "Aye, and I'd hope we have more luck with this one." Peter replied quietly.

A light rain began to drizzle against the road, and many of the men adjusted their tweed peaky caps to suit this. The rain became heavier and soon the men were soaked to the skin. A signpost outlined the men had another $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile to go to reach the barracks. The oncoming headlights signalled for the men to take cover, unsure of the vehicle. A doctor was the most likely possibility, but the men could not take enough precaution. Soon the lights had passed, and the men crept out from the ditches they cowered in.

Along the road they trotted until they spotted the dimly lit barracks. They crouched behind the wall of it awaiting directions. Suddenly the men burst out of formation and began to fire in the windows. The distinct sound of glass shattering could be heard in the midst of the loud thundering fire.

Jack was among the first men to enter into the building, looking to raid it for weapons and ammunition. He rushed in and was met face first by the ground as he felt his knees go from underneath him. A RIC officer had swung a baton into the back of Jack's legs and now held him firmly, with his arm around Jack's neck and his pistol pressed tightly against his spine. "Shoot me," the officer cried out, "And you lose this man, one of your precious rebels." This chilling message stopped many of the rebels in their tracks, knowing Jack was one of the finest men in the rebels. Deadshot he was even nicknamed.

Peter hearing the shouts, scurried over underneath the window, careful not to leave himself exposed to gunshots. He peered in over the ledge and spotted Jack's precarious position. He could barely see the officer, in fact none of the man's face, only his slightly over extended knee. Peter knew an inch too low or too high would result in his best friend's death. He thought of how he wished he was as fine a marksman as Jack was and cursed his poor nerves. He pulled down on the trigger and it fired off in his hand, slightly startling him. Peter looked down towards the ground and touched the cross dangling from his neck before looking up. To his relief he saw Jack grinning back at him, and the RIC officer on the ground clutching his knee. Once again, the pair shared their look and a wave of relief washed over them.

Many similar raids would follow in the years that came after and Jack and Peter began to love the life as Irish rebels, hiding away and hitting on the run. One such day, Peter was stowed away in a barn outside Castleblayney when Jack came rushing in looking flustered and panting. "They've called a truce. There's going to be talks."

Jack and Peter returned to regular family life unsure of what they were to do now. Word soon reached them of the treaty agreed by Michael Collins himself. "It's a bleedin' disgrace. I didn't fight and live in those conditions for this. It's not enough." Jack declared about the treaty. "It's a start though Jack. Another step to freedom." "Freedom. We'll never have freedom." Jack said quietly as he stormed out the door.

In the weeks that followed, sides began to form. Pro-Treaty and Anti-Treaty, men who had fought side by side now dared not to look each other in the eye. Pro-Treatyists began to socialize in the same pubs and Anti-Treatyists did the same. A divide had been cast right through Ireland. Priests' sermons encouraged peace, but these sermons were often interrupted by rows over the treaty. Peter and Jack began to see less of each other, and it was as if their childhood had been erased.

Soon the debates worsened, and they left the verbal plane. Hits were put on known members of the opposing side and executions even took place. The Pro-Treatyists had somewhat of an upper hand in that the Anti-Treatyists were seen more as the criminals. On a routine check of an old safehouse a group of Anti-Treatyists were caught asleep by the opposing side. They were beaten and bruised and as Jack looked up, a familiar face caught his eye. "If only Seamus could see us now. Some Irishmen we are." He spat up at Peter. Peter refused to look him in the eye, and at this moment he thought ill of the treaty as well. The men were brought to a new Pro-Treaty station. The men knew of their own crimes and the fate which awaited them. Peter looked on unable to say or do anything. He thought to himself that this was not what he fought for, nor what he ever wanted.

The fiery explosion of gunshots interrupted Peter's thoughts as his stomach dropped to the floor. Once again, he touched his cross. A tear left his eye when he looked up to realize his prayers had not been answered. Jack lay crumpled on the floor in front of him, his gaze frozen in death, a final look shared, as blood streamed from his chest.

By Nathan McArdle
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Fighting For - And Against - the Nation

Growing up, my grandfather often used to tell me stories about his mother. She was in the Old IRA, he told me, and she used to stand on the hills and shoot down the Black and Tans. He always laughed when he said it, so I never knew whether or not to believe him. But no one in my family knew the full extent of my great-grandmother's involvement in the War of Independence - until I discovered her pension application on the Bureau of Military History two years ago. In her own handwriting, it told her story, from a young woman striving for an independent Ireland, to a mother and widow struggling to make ends meet. It was a privilege to read of her struggles - and her triumphs - and to learn about such a strong, brave and inspirational woman.

Ellen Mulligan, née Fitzpatrick, was born on 19th January 1901 to Patrick and Ellen Fitzpatrick of Aghabog, Co. Monaghan. Ellen's father was a tailor, and they lived in a small house in the townland of Carn. At seventeen, Ellen joined the Aghabog and Greenan's Cross branch of Cumann na mBan, and was appointed Secretary. Ellen's personal testimony in her pension application, and the letters of her references, give a full account of her work in Cumann na mBan. Thomas Gavan, an ex-officer in the National Army, remembered Ellen as "a very active and energetic member", and Patrick Murphy, Captain of the Greenan's Cross Volunteers wrote of how she was "of the utmost assistance to our Company during the Black and Tan trouble in this country." Giving evidence, Gavan initially said, "she was the best in the coy. area" but amended this to: "she was as good as any in the coy. area but there were others as good as she."

Throughout the War of Independence, Ellen was heavily involved with revolutionary activities in Monaghan, carrying and concealing firearms, carrying dispatches, and caring for prisoners and men on the run. Important IRA leaders such as Dan Hogan, Eoin O'Duffy, Col. O'Carroll and the Fitzpatrick brothers stayed in Ellen's house a number of times. Prisoners were kept "in a vacant house in a lonely part of the country about half a mile from her home" and Ellen used to "go down and cook all their meals." Occasionally prisoners were held in her house, a well-known example being Francis McPhillips, a suspected RIC informer and member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, who was brought to Ellen's house the night before he was tied to Aghabog Church gates to act as a warning for the parishioners as they attended morning Mass. Later, on 9th March 1921, McPhillips was court-martialed and executed by the IRA, a note on his chest reading: "Convicted informer, IRA."

There was an arms dump in a field beside Ellen's house and it was Ellen's duty to look after these arms ("revolvers, some hand grenades, and 6 or 7 rifles") and hand them out when required. She was actively involved in transporting these arms around the countryside. Murphy said: "On one occasion when an activity was been [sic] arranged for Roslea district she conveyed the rifles and ammunition for us in company with one of her companions." Ellen herself spoke about bringing arms to "Connolly's in Rossleigh" in a pony and trap, a nine mile journey, in March 1921. Carrying dispatches was a big part of Ellen's work, "about

2 a week on average, a distance of 3 miles", often at night. This was an extremely risky job; Susan Beagin, Ellen's neighbour and fellow Cumann na mBan member wrote in her own pension application: "The RIC were continually around our district."

Ellen also stated that "the stretcher that Matt Fitzpatrick was carried on when rescued was made in our house." This was the well-known rescue of Commandant Matt Fitzpatrick from Monaghan Infirmary in March 1921, after his arrest by Black and Tans. Ellen's future brother-in-law, Patrick Mulligan of Threemilehouse, was one of the men chosen to act as stretcher bearers, and my grandfather believes that it was in fact their father's family, also tailors, who made the stretcher.

Ellen was heavily involved in the financial side of her branch, collecting funds for Volunteers by holding dances and raffles. Murphy recalled, "We also as a safety measure placed some of our Volunteer funds in her hands." As well as this, Ellen often had to go out at night with messages, often collecting food from O'Donoghue's shop, and, as O'Donoghue recollected, she would "appear at all unearthly hours."

In her statement, Ellen claimed that her service finished "at the end of the Tan War", but she was a lifelong supporter of Fianna Fáil, the anti-treaty political party founded in 1926 by Éamonn de Valera after his split from Sinn Féin.

After the War of Independence, Ellen worked as a secretary in Monaghan Courthouse for some time before marrying John Mulligan of Threemilehouse in 1932. John's family had also been involved in the revolutionary movement; his brother Patrick had been Adjutant in the Threemilehouse IRA, and his sister Sarah had been a member of Cumann na mBan. Ellen and John had six children. Sadly in the 1940s, John developed tuberculosis, a lung disease rampant in Ireland at the time, and was no longer able to work. Ellen was left solely responsible for raising their six children, all of school age. It was at this time that she first applied for a military pension, granted to anyone who could prove active service during the Easter Rising, War of Independence, or Civil War.

Ellen was initially refused the pension, a decision which put her under a great deal of pressure: "I expected the money for X-mas and your letter caused me a lot of worry." In 1950, Ellen's eldest daughter Eileen died of tubercular meningitis, and five years later, John also succumbed to his illness. After requesting a re-investigation, Ellen was finally granted the pension, giving her an income of ten pounds per year, equal today to approximately €260, making her one of only fourteen out of 128 women in Co. Monaghan to be granted a military service pension. To me, it seems clear that without her determination, my great-grandmother would not have been given one either.

Ellen was also awarded two service medals in recognition of her work in Cumann na mBan; the Service (1917 - 1921) Medal (without bar), and the Truce (1921) Commemoration Medal. These medals are now in the possession of her son, my great-uncle.

On 10th August 1980, Ellen died at the age of seventy-nine. Her funeral took place in Threemilehouse Church, with a volley being fired over her grave. The bullets were collected and given to her children.

It's ironic, and to my mind very sad, that while Ellen spent three years fighting British rule for Irish freedom, her toughest battle was the ten years she spent fighting the bureaucracy of the new and independent Ireland for which she had worked so hard. An Ireland that sadly didn't "cherish all of its children equally", but undervalued the contribution the women of Ireland had made and perhaps neglected the contribution they could have continued to make in the Ireland that the Proclamation promised. "Equal rights and equal opportunities for all its citizens"? That didn't happen in Ellen's case and in the case of many other women of her generation.

As I enter adulthood I am conscious that as a woman in modern Ireland, I enjoy my rights and freedoms as an Irish woman only because of the sacrifice of women like my great-grandmother. She and the other women of Cumann na mBan call on us not to shirk the difficult battles or to shy from the tough fight if right and freedom are threatened. A lesson which, unfortunately, every generation must learn anew.

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David Nelson



Nelson in khaki service dress in the rank of captain.

“A war hero who fought on with serious injuries despite being ordered to retreat” (Belfast Telegraph).

Major David Nelson became the first Ulsterman and the second ever Irishman to be awarded the Victoria Cross during the First World War. The Victoria Cross is the highest decoration for gallantry in the British Forces awarded to only 627 individuals out of the millions that served the country during the first world war. (Belfast Telegraph)

Nelson was born in Deraghland, Stranooden County Monaghan on 3rd April 1886 to David Nelson and Mary Anne Black. (Wikipedia)

He enlisted on 27 December 1904 and after a year's course of education was posted to 98 Battery Royal Field Artillery. In April 1906 he was promoted to Acting Bombardier, and a year later posted to L Battery (RHA (Royal Horse Artillery)). By January 1911 he was a Corporal and 2 years later, was sent on a Short Gunnery Course at Shoeburyness. This earned him a 1st class gunnery certificate. (British Empire)

On 5 August 1914 he was promoted to sergeant. 10 days later the battery was in France where he received his first war wound on 24 August. (British Empire)

On the night of September 1st, 1914, sergeant Nelson took part in the famous action at Néry France where he helped to bring guns into action- with an officer (Edward Kinder Bradbury) and a warrant officer (George Thomas Dorrell)- under heavy fire attack and in spite of being heavily wounded, he persevered and remained with the guns until all the ammunition was expended, although he had been ordered to retire to cover earlier. (British Empire)

Because of this Nelson and two others won the Victoria Cross. Their officer, captain Bradbury died of his wounds and Sergeant Nelson, although brutally wounded himself, survived, along with BSM Dorrell.

Nelson was evacuated to a field hospital but was captured when Germans occupied the hospital. Prior to this when he managed to escape, he was treated in a French hospital where a piece shrapnel was removed from his lung saving his life. (British Empire)

His Victoria Cross was announced on 16 November 1914 and on 13 January 1915 he was presented with a medal at Buckingham Palace, by King George V. On 1 March 1915 he was appointed Gunnery Instructor at Shoeburyness until his return to France on 11 December 1917. (British Empire)

During his time in France Nelson was given a commission and promoted to acting Major, commanding a battery in March 1918. On 7 April 1918 Major Nelson was mortally wounded, having received severe injuries all over his body. He died the next day 8, April 1918 aged 32, leaving his beloved wife Ada Bishop and their son Victor Cyril. Nelson was later buried in Lillers Community Cemetery. (British Empire)

David Nelson served 14 years of allegiance to the British Army from the years of 1904-1918. (Wikipedia)

Today his Victoria Cross award is displayed at the Imperial War Museum in London.

Both of Nelsons parents were Presbyterian. 100 years after his death Minister Humphreys of Monaghan unveiled a plaque in Stranooden County Monaghan to commemorate David Nelson. She unveiled the plaque at Cahans Presbyterian Church, which Nelsons family attended in the late nineteenth century. (Merrion Street)

Minister Humphreys said "it is fitting that the bravery of this Monaghan man is being commemorated exactly 100 years after the brave actions which led to Nelson being awarded a Victoria Cross".

By reflecting on and commemorating those who died 100 years ago we can appreciate and remember the sheer suffering and tremendous amount of bravery they contributed during war.

Major David Nelson a local Monaghan man born and bred went on to be one of millions to sacrifice his life during war. A man of honor and bravery who deserved his awards during battle and who showed how truly diligent and brave he was.

It is extremely important that today we remember the heroes of war, people like David Nelson and not just the blood that was shed.

To me local history is so important. Often when we learn about history and war we are taught of negative things that happened and the amount of deaths, but when we hear of people like David Nelson and all his work and bravery this reminds us of the positives he contributed to the war.

"A war hero who fought on with serious injuries despite being ordered to retreat" (Belfast Telegraph).

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