Tomás O’Dóláin (Ardee Irish Volunteers) to Eoin MacNeill, 15 June 1914.

Eoin MacNeill papers,
IE UCDA LA1/K/132
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This month’s from the Archives document is a snapshot of Irish politics – and the intersection between constitutionalism and physical force – during the summer of 1914. By the end of June, the situation both in Ireland and Europe began to develop at an ever-quickening pace. By 26 July Ireland stood on the brink of civil conflict. By 1 August, the First World War had officially begun.

Eoin MacNeill has been a much-discussed figure on HistoryHub.ie since we began exploring the origins and development of the Irish Volunteers last November. The movement had grown from approximately 13,000 at the end of 1913 to roughly 170,000 by the summer of 1914. In June of 1914, John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, demanded that the 25-strong provisional committee of the Irish Volunteers accept the addition of a further 25 nominees of Redmond’s choosing. This was Redmond’s attempt to gain majority control of the organisation; there were already a number of loyal Redmondites on the original provisional committee but they did not have a majority.

One of the key questions for historians is whether John Redmond led or followed the bulk of Irish nationalists into the Irish Volunteers. The numerical evidence makes it quite clear that Redmond followed rather than led the enormous influx of new recruits that joined up in 1914. Two incidents, the Curragh Crisis of March 1914 and the (Ulster unionist) Larne Gun Running of April appear to have been responsible for this surge in recruitment. Aodgán O’Rahilly (son of Michael Joseph (The) O’Rahilly) states in his biography of his father that, directly after these incidents, the Irish Volunteers were enlisting 1,000 new members per week. It was this spike which finally alarmed John Redmond and prompted him to assert control over a movement that had hitherto acted in the name of the Home Rule movement but outside the control of its elected representatives. Grassroots origins and lack of constitutional
connections are two key factors that differentiated the Irish Volunteers from their Ulster counterparts.

Redmond’s ultimatum was ultimately accepted by Eoin MacNeill and his colleagues on the original provisional committee. They decided that unity had to be preserved at all costs, even if it meant losing control of the movement they had founded and developed. Thus the provisional committee expanded, the constitutional wing of Irish nationalist politics made official its links to this paramilitary organisation and calls and efforts to import rifles for the Irish Volunteers were stepped up.

This month’s letter, from Tomás O’Dóláin, a local volunteer in Ardee, county Louth, to Eoin MacNeill, gives a sense of how Redmond’s demand for control of the volunteers was received at local level in rural Ireland. MacNeill and those allied to him were quite put out by the authoritarian and demanding tone of Redmond’s ultimatum. It should be remembered that the Irish Volunteers had been officially non-party since its inception and one of the force’s declared policies was that it would try to unify as many Irishmen in defence of Ireland and Home Rule as possible. The foundation of the movement in November 1913 even saw an olive branch extended to the Carsonites and MacNeill in particular was keen to assert that the Ulster Volunteers were not the enemies of the Irish Volunteers. MacNeill hoped both forces could one day stand as one. By asserting control over the volunteers, MacNeill believed that Redmond was introducing partisanship into a movement that was committed to being as broad-based as possible. For those secret IRB men on the provisional committee and elsewhere in the Irish Volunteers, the Redmond takeover was a direct threat to their longstanding project to use the Irish Volunteers as a front for their more radical objectives.

One key factor to bear in mind regarding the growth and development of the Irish Volunteers is that, in its early phases, it was more popular in cities and large towns, and especially in Dublin. The dual Curragh and Larne crises broadened out the appeal of the Irish Volunteers significantly and country units which had previously had only a handful of members now swelled their ranks with new members galvanised by the realisation that the army could no longer be counted on to safeguard the rule of law in
Ulster and that ‘Carson’s Army’ now had 25,000 rifles and 5 million rounds of ammunition to back up their words.

Tomás O’Dóláin’s letter to Eoin MacNeill appears to accurately represent the opinion of the majority of rural nationalists at the time of Redmond’s takeover bid. Fears about the alienation of Protestants or the potential for sectarianism if Joseph Devlin’s Ancient Order of Hibernians gained a prominent role in the Volunteers were not matters of major concern to rural nationalist communities. Ardee is less than twenty miles from the modern-day border. As O’Dóláin’s letter suggests, protection of Ulster Catholics was a real and pressing issue for him and other nationalists at this point in time. During the Buckingham Palace Conference negotiations in July 1914, Edward Carson received communication from at least one Ulster Volunteer commander in Enniskillen which threatened sectarian violence if Carson jettisoned counties Fermanagh and Tyrone when negotiating with Redmond. While Ulster nationalists like MacNeill, Bulmer Hobson, and Roger Casement did not wish to exacerbate sectarian tension, many nationalists began to believe that guns were the surest safeguard for nationalists in the north.

Tensions in the Irish Volunteers were not allayed by the capitulation of MacNeill and the rest of the provisional committee of the Irish Volunteers. From June onwards, there were recurrent differences of outlook and opinion between these two factions on the augmented provisional committee. Ultimately, MacNeill gave up on unity when John Redmond called for participation in the British war effort with his Woodenbridge speech – ‘to go wherever the firing line extends’ – on 20 September 1914. However, between June and September 1914 tensions simmered below the surface of the Irish Volunteers. Ultimately, 158,360 volunteers (92.8%) sided with Redmond and joined a new force, the National Volunteers. 12,306 volunteers retained the title ‘Irish’ and stayed by MacNeill. That almost as many men were enlisted in the Irish Volunteers prior to the split as there were Irish soldiers who served over the entire course of the First World War underlines the popularity of the movement.

Under normal circumstances, MacNeill’s minority faction might have melted away. But minorities matter in Irish history. After St Patrick’s day 1915, Redmond’s National Volunteers had all but evaporated. The following year, an even smaller
minority of MacNeill’s minority carved out a lasting legacy when they proclaimed a republic at Easter. In 1914, John Redmond followed public opinion into the Irish Volunteers. By 1916, public opinion was playing catch-up, eventually giving retrospective mandate to the Easter rebels at the ballot box in 1918. In understanding these convoluted links between the summer of 1914 and Easter of 1916, we gain valuable insight into the complexities of Irish history. The rural-urban divide, as well as the conflicting concerns for northern nationalists and an inclusivist outlook for the Irish volunteers meant that tension and disunity became more prevalent as the Irish Volunteers grew in size and importance. In between spectacles like the Howth and Larne gun-runnings, organisational machinations such as the takeover of MacNeill’s provisional committee are in danger of being overlooked. The fusion of constitutional and paramilitary wings of Irish nationalism in the summer of 1914 nonetheless remains a highly significant step in the exacerbating Irish crisis. For latter-day admirers of John Redmond as a conciliatory constitutionalist who championed non-violence, his decision to take control of the Irish Volunteers – even in the spirit of moderating the movement – is a difficult episode that must be confronted critically. The deeper we go into history, the less we find ‘good’ and ‘bad’ guys. Instead, we find more complex and more human characters who make decisions and react as much as they act when faced with uncertainty and dilemmas.

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Further reading


Transcription of Tomás O’Dóláin (Ardee Irish Volunteers) to Eoin MacNeill, 15 June 1914.

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Ardee 15th June 1914

A cara

I trust you appreciate fully the work of the Provisional C[ommit]tee of the Volunteers in conceiving & originating the movement, & object strongly to any comments like those of the Freeman¹ which seem to ignore this. But is not the request of Redmond reasonable & deserving of acceptance in the intent of unity & also to secure the confidence & support of the country for the Volunteers?

You must recognise that almost all the Country Corps came into existence on the from the example of headquarters but on their own initiative & with the definite purpose of assisting to win & keep Home Rule & if necessary to protect the Ulster Nationalists [end p. 1] from the Orangemen. You may say that [word illegible] and they all look to Redmond not to the Provisional C[ommit]tee for the direction of their policy.

[Word illegible]

Further the general public in Ireland will not subscribe for weapons to arm men who are to take their orders for the use of these arms from a Provisional C[ommit]tee of whom they have no political experience.

They will only subscribe for them & I am sure the Americans Irish will only provide them on the guarantee that their use will be under the direction of the executive government of Ireland’s [word illegible] she has chosen & national effort for self Government – Redmond & his party whom she has chosen & of whom she has experience & confidence & whose responsibility is public & a binding security against rashness. [end of p. 2]

We had a conference of delegates for all corps in the county of Louth yesterday. I must honestly say the three Sinn Feiners who spoke were the most moderate & fair of us all. But [word illegible] all the rest were strongly resolved that they [word illegible] their movements [word illegible] under Redmond’s direction to [word illegible] at his back.

¹ The Freeman's Journal which was, by this period, partially funded by the Irish Parliamentary Party and acted as its semi-official press organ.
I found some (not Hibernians\(^2\) at all but thoroughly independent Nationalists) very prejudiced against the Pro[visional] C[ommit]tee because of their slighting of Redmond’s proposal & I think it will be so everywhere outside of the cities & a few large towns. Surely it is no indignity for the Prov[isional] C[ommit]tee to share [end of page 3] the interest of the movement with Redmond as he asks – to make the Prov[isional] C[ommit]tee representative somewhat more proportionately representative of the rank & file of the Volunteers of the country.

This needs no answer
Mise

Sergant Ó Dóláin

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\(^2\) Members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. A Nationalist Catholic fraternal organisation allied to the Irish Parliamentary Party and headed by John Redmond’s party colleague and MP for West Belfast, Joseph Devlin.
A cípa

In judging officially fully the work of the Permanent Civil and Volunteers in connection with the movement, I object strongly to any comments like those of the Freeman which seem to spring from the fact that not the original Redmond pamphlet & dealing with acceptance of the irredescent & unity in the interests of the country for the Federation.

I must recognise that almost all the country corps came into existence on the front of the example of headquarters but in their own initiative in the definite purpose of assisting them to uphold Home Rule & if necessary to protect the Ulster Volunteers.
From the (Irish Volunteers) and they all told Redmond up to the Parliamentary Party for the direction of their policy.

Further, the general public in Ireland will not undertake for themselves to arm men. You see the threat and then for the use of these arms. From a Parliamentary Party when they have no political experience. They will not undertake for them. I think we can see the American will only provide them on the guarantee that their direct action will be under the direction of the executive government. I think the United States are not natural allies for self-government.

Redmond they talk. They talk. They say.

I am the responsibility. These speeches are public statements against us.
We had a committee of deputations from all parts of the county yesterday. I must honestly say that to three deputations on the same day; there were the most moderate and fair of all. But of the rest, were strongly insistent that they would not continue under Redmond's direction.  

I think some of them might help toward independence. Nationalists are very prejudiced against the N.C.T. because of their elevation of Redmond's proposal. I think it will be so everywhere outside of the cities after large turnouts.
the interest of the movement with
Redmond as he asked. It
in the view of the representation
remained more important to
representation of the rank and
file of the Volunteers of this country.


dated 6th June