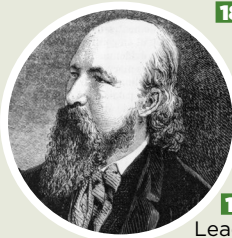


THE IRISH REPUBLICAN BROTHERHOOD: SNAPSHOTS IN TIME...

1858 Founded in Dublin on St Patrick's Day by James Stephens (right). Called the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood at first. Secret, oath-bound society, structured on military principles.



1863 Denounced by Catholic Church hierarchy. Newspaper, the *Irish People*, is published. Suppressed two years later.

1865 Leaders, including

Stephens, arrested. He escaped from prison and travelled to America.

1867 Denounced by Pope Pius IX. Rising planned for February called off because of informer. Outbreaks in March in Dublin, Tipperary, Limerick, Clare

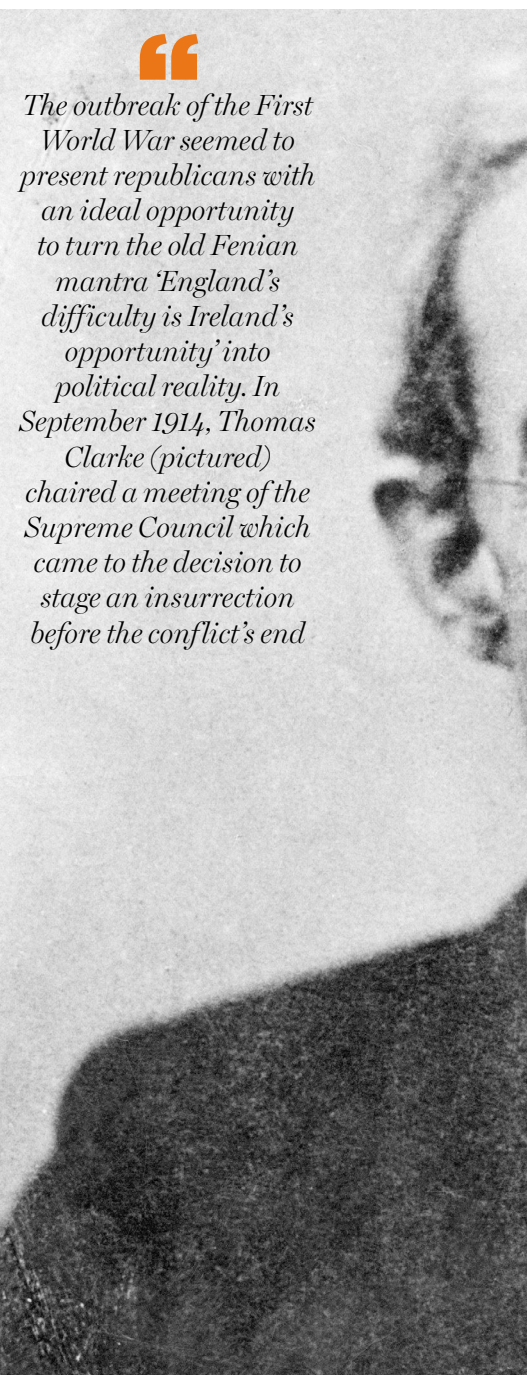
and Waterford suppressed. 'Manchester Martyrs' hanged in November. 60,000 at funeral in Dublin.

1869 Supreme Council drafted a constitution for the Irish Republic. IRB soldiers called the Irish Republican Army.



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The outbreak of the First World War seemed to present republicans with an ideal opportunity to turn the old Fenian mantra 'England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity' into political reality. In September 1914, Thomas Clarke (pictured) chaired a meeting of the Supreme Council which came to the decision to stage an insurrection before the conflict's end



Revolution is in the air

The Irish Republican Brotherhood's revival played a key role in the planning of 1916, writes **Dr Richard McElligott**

THE Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) had been established as a secret, oath-bound, revolutionary organisation dedicated to the overthrow of British rule in Ireland by violent means. However following the disaster of its 1867 rebellion, the ruling Supreme Council adopted a new constitution which dictated that the Brotherhood and its members would wait until they enjoyed the popular support of the Irish people before they attempted another uprising.

By the 1890s, that prospect looked increasingly remote as self-government for Ireland, in the form of Home Rule, seemed on the cusp of reality and only an insignificant minority persisted in their commitment to achieving an Irish republic through arms. As the new century dawned, the IRB appeared to have increasingly lost its way. Its membership (which once surpassed 40,000) shrank and its leadership seemed more interested in Dublin municipal

politics than plotting the overthrow of British rule.

Yet the advent of the Gaelic Revival and its profound impact on Irish nationalism would help rejuvenate the IRB. The Brotherhood became adept at infiltrating the various organisations which sprung up in its wake. In particular, its members gained increasing influence within the Gaelic League and the GAA, two pillars of the emerging cultural nationalist movement. The centenary celebrations of the 1798 rebellion also facilitated the IRB's re-emergence on the national stage. Many of its members were successfully appointed to local and national 1798 centenary committees, established to organise and plan the celebrations to mark that doomed rebellion.

More significantly, the emergence of cultural nationalism as a force in Irish society helped to radicalise a committed core of young militant nationalists who revitalised the Brotherhood. Veterans of the 1916 Rising would later remark how their generation naturally graduated from

cultural to physical force nationalism, a development demonstrated most forcefully by the fact that six of the seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation were Gaelic League members and five of the 16 men subsequently executed were prominent in the GAA.

In 1905 two members of the Belfast IRB, Denis McCullough and Bulmer Hobson, took a leading role in the reinvigoration of the Brotherhood. Through their mutual involvement in Sinn Féin, Hobson became close friends with Seán Mac Diarmada, who was subsequently sworn into the Brotherhood. In 1907 their reorganisation of the IRB was given added impetus by the return to Ireland from the United States of Thomas Clarke. Aware of the possibility of a future European war between the Great Powers, Clarke returned to help ensure that if Britain was dragged into such a conflict, Irish republicans would be in a position to react.

Once Mac Diarmada, McCullough and Hobson relocated to Dublin, Clarke became their political mentor. By 1911 all four had

secured key positions on the IRB's Supreme Council. Under their secret direction, the Brotherhood now became a much more active and prominent force in the years before 1916.

MEANWHILE the formation of the Volunteers signalled the moment the gun was introduced into popular Irish nationalist politics. The threat posed by militant Ulster unionism to nationalist aspirations of Home Rule helped radicalise a number of former political moderates.

Among them was Patrick Pearse who now began to extol the virtues of an armed nationalist militia; 'We must accustom ourselves ... to the use of arms ... bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood.'

Pearse along with fellow Gaelic League members, Joseph Mary Plunkett, Éamonn Ceannt and Thomas MacDonagh, attended the inaugural meeting of the Volunteers in November 1913 and all four

1873

Divide opens on constitutional versus non-constitutional approach. Membership fell from 11,000 to around 8,000.

1876

Support withdrawn for Home Rule.

1884

Adopted policy of infiltrating organisations such as the GAA.

1898

Support recovered with leading role in 1798 Rising commemorations.



1904

Belfast revival with Bulmer Hobson (*left*), Denis McCullough and Seán Mac Diarmada.

1907

Return from New York of Thomas Clarke.

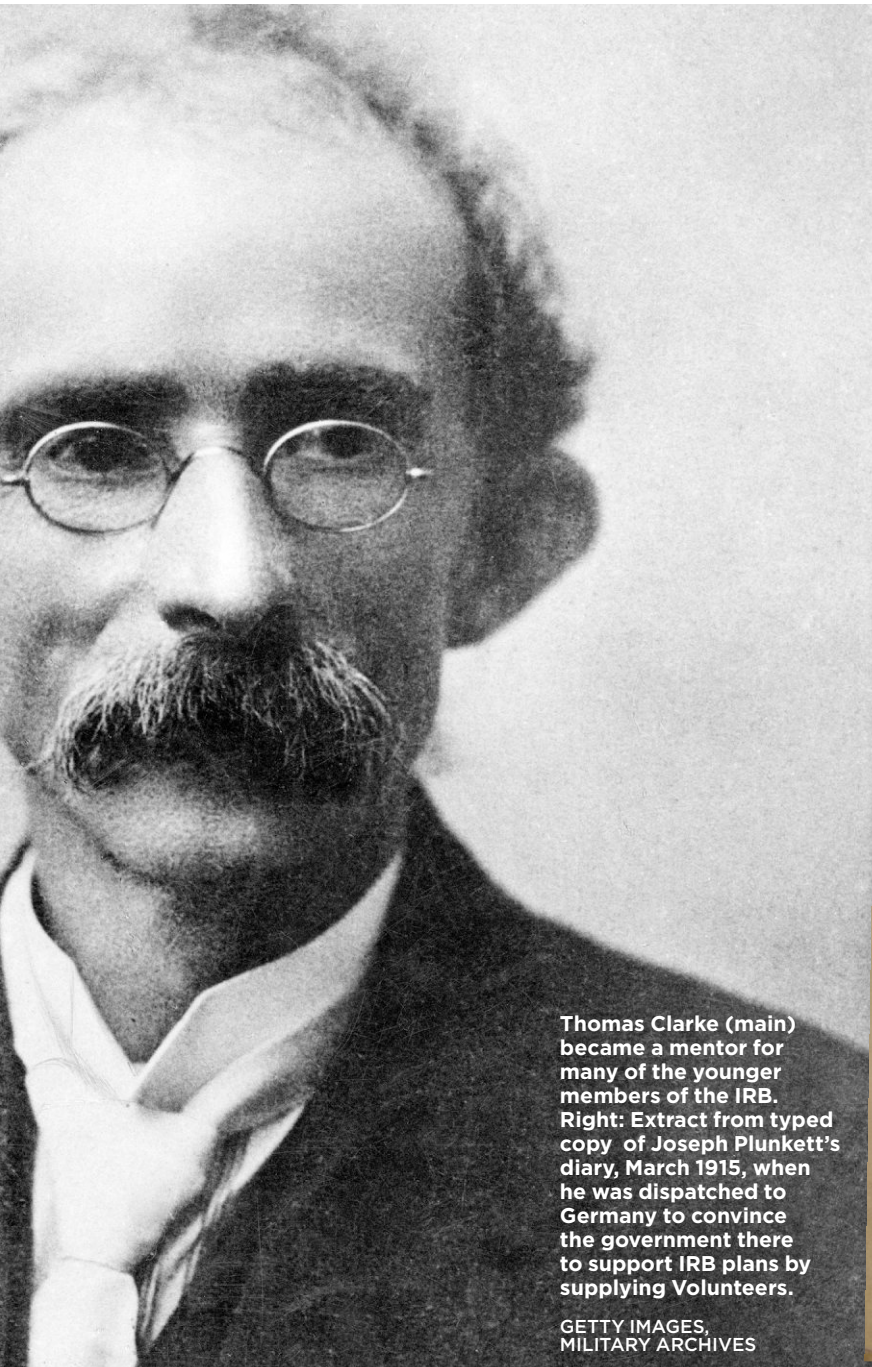
1913

Hobson held public meeting at the Rotunda, Dublin, at which Irish Volunteers was established.

1914

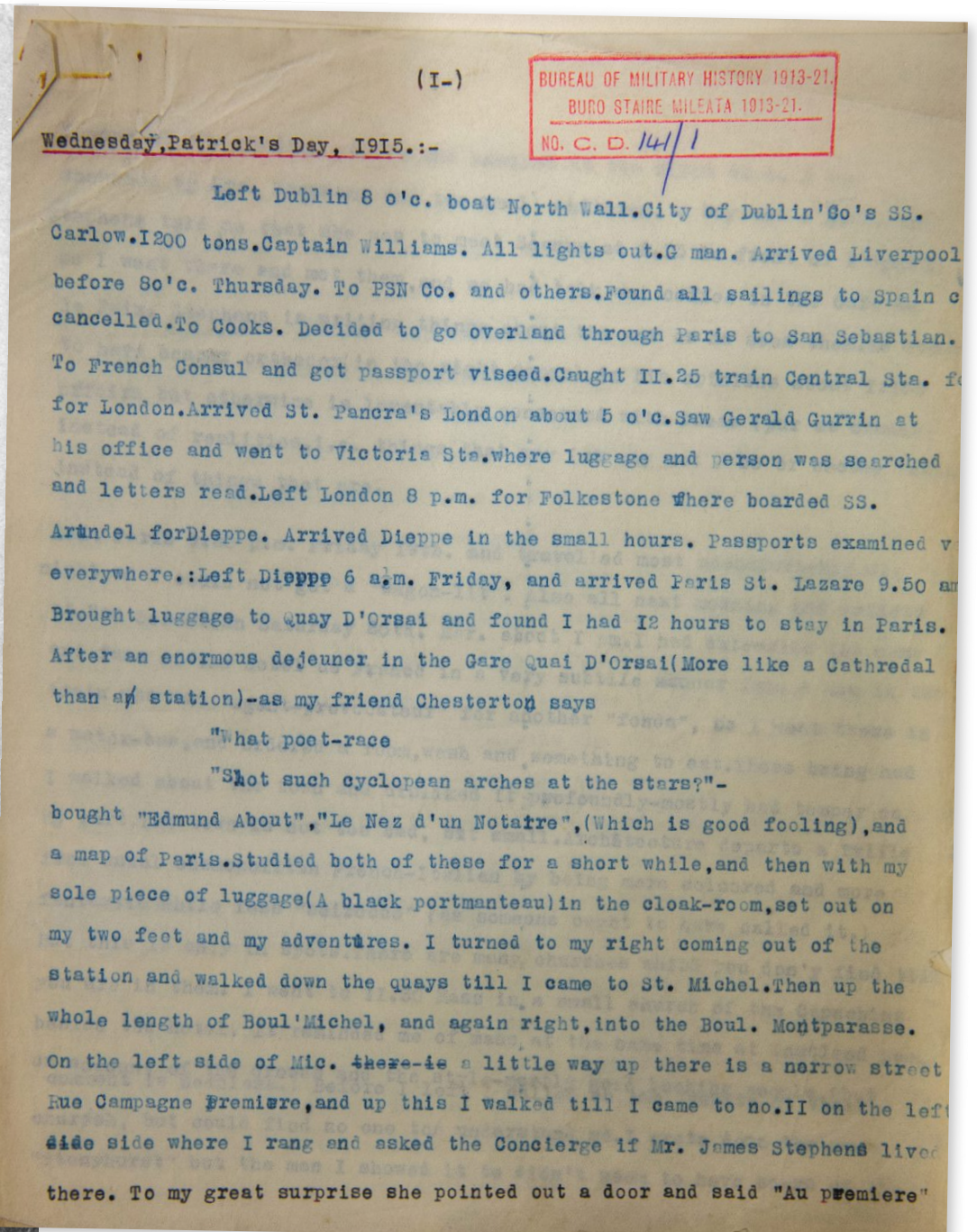
Membership around 80,000. The Asgard lands rifles and ammunition at Howth. By September, membership was

180,000. National Volunteers formed. Irish Volunteers continue with Patrick Pearse and Joseph Plunkett as Directors of Military Organisation, and Thomas MacDonagh as Director of Training. These three became members of the IRB Military Council and planned for the Easter Rising. **FC**



Thomas Clarke (main) became a mentor for many of the younger members of the IRB. Right: Extract from typed copy of Joseph Plunkett's diary, March 1915, when he was dispatched to Germany to convince the government there to support IRB plans by supplying Volunteers.

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men were elected onto the Volunteers' ruling provisional committee. Though the force was nominally under the control of another high ranking Gaelic Leaguer, Eoin MacNeill, the IRB had already begun to clandestinely infiltrate it at every level. Through their prominent Volunteer activity, Pearse and Plunkett were co-opted into the Brotherhood (Mac Diarmada had already recruited Ceannt into the IRB in 1911).

The outbreak of the First World War seemed to present republicans with an ideal opportunity to turn the old Fenian mantra 'England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity' into political reality. In September 1914, Clarke chaired a meeting of the Supreme Council which came to the decision to stage an insurrection before the conflict's end. An Advisory Committee was subsequently established which approached Plunkett (a man considered by his contemporaries to have a flair for military tactics) to draft a plan for military operations in Dublin.

Once John Redmond's call for the Volunteers to enlist in the British war

effort split the powerful movement in two, the IRB's control over the more radical faction under MacNeill continued to grow. In the winter of 1914, Pearse's growing national prominence as the Volunteers' chief propagandist secured him the role of Director of Military Organisation in the newly created Volunteer Headquarters Staff. He was joined by Plunkett who became the Volunteers' Director of Military Operations, MacDonagh (Director of Training) and Ceannt (Director of Communications).

THE following May, Clarke and Mac Diarmada established a separate Military Council within the IRB to finalise plans for an uprising against British rule using the Irish Volunteers. The continuation of the First World War offered the Council the opportunity and time to execute its plans. Pearse, Plunkett and Ceannt were the only ones initially on the Council and numbers were kept small for security purposes. In September Clarke and Mac Diarmada also joined.

Gathering in secret, the Council left no

written records of its meetings, yet by now it had become the real power within the IRB. MacDonagh, who was finally initiated into the IRB in the spring of 1915, and James Connolly, whose radical Citizen Army had increasingly aligned with the Volunteers throughout the previous year, were the last two members to join the Council in January 1916.

Pearse was now emerging as the central figure of the forthcoming rebellion and had initially planned to launch a revolt in September 1915. To that end Plunkett was dispatched on a mission to Germany to convince its government to support the IRB's plans by supplying the Volunteers with a shipment of modern, military grade rifles and heavy weaponry. The rebellion's date was subsequently pushed back until the spring of 1916. Into the winter of 1915, the Military Council secretly perfected its plans, which were a modified form of Plunkett's strategy worked out the previous year. In preparation for the uprising, Volunteer units across the country were increasingly placed under the command of trusted IRB men

who reported directly to Pearse, bypassing MacNeill's official chain of command.

Profoundly influenced by the legacy of the failed rebellion of his idol, Robert Emmett, Pearse became increasingly convinced that modern Irish nationalism needed a similar sacrificial gesture. Only then would it be pushed into a final and decisive war of independence against British rule. Increasingly displaying this martyrdom complex, Pearse had prefigured his destiny in a play, *The Singer*, which he wrote in 1915. It centred on a poet-turned-rebel who dies proclaiming 'one man can free a people as one man (Christ) redeemed the world.'

As events would soon show, Pearse's sense of destiny was strong enough to pull the other six signatories and 1,500 Volunteers into the maelstrom of Easter 1916.

Dr Richard McElligott lectures in Modern Irish History in UCD. His study of the role of the GAA in the 1916 Rising will be published this October in 'The GAA and Revolution in Ireland: 1913-1923' (Collins Press), edited by Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh