



# Seismic events cloud explanation for fall in Protestant population

Evidence suggests economics and marriage rules led to migration but more sinister elements may have been a factor, writes **Marie Coleman**

**T**he decline in the non-Catholic population of the 26 counties between 1911 and 1926 is one of the starkest demographic changes in modern Ireland. The period — between the last all-island census and the first Free State one — was marked by seismic events including the Home Rule crisis, World War I and revolution, making it hard to pinpoint a specific cause for the fall.

Evidence from the valuable yet under-explored records of the three principal non-Catholic denominations (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist) in one midlands county — Longford — helps to identify factors influencing the movement of Protestants in this period. The records help us address the thorny question of whether there was a sectarian element to the Irish revolution that would explain the exodus.

County Longford was not prosperous economically and experienced significant population decline generally between the Great Famine and the Great War, falling by 39pc between 1861 and 1911. It had one of the highest emigration rates in Leinster in the early 20th century. Before 1920, emigration was the principal factor identified by local Church of Ireland clergy to explain the depletion of the youth in their parishes. Annual rural deans' reports explained this was because "young people leave to get work elsewhere" (*Shrule parish, 1915*). Migration within Ireland was also a factor. This evidence lends weight to Andy Bielenberg's thesis that voluntary migration was the most significant single factor in Protestant depopulation.

By contrast, the historian David Fitzpatrick has argued that natural decline and the failure to attract sufficient new members, either through conversions or increasing rates of marriage or birth, was the principal reason for the fall in the non-Catholic population. Church of Ireland records in Longford lend credence to this view. The decrease in Ardagh parish for 1915 was attributed to a "natural fall in population". Church of Ireland statistics confirm this. From 1915 to 1925 the number of burials in Clonbroney and Killoe was 21pc higher than baptisms, while between 1910 and 1918 Clonguish recorded 72 burials but only 37 baptisms.

The 1911 census was conducted not long after the papal decree on the validity of Catholic marriage, *Ne Temere*. The pressure on the non-Catholic partner in a mixed marriage to raise the children as Catholic has been identified as a significant factor in the fall in Protestant numbers. However, there is little evidence from the 1911 census that interdenominational marriage was as prevalent.

Indeed, for Longford's numerically small Methodists and Presbyterians, the desire for marriage within their own denominations appears to account for significant movement out of the county, especially of young single women. This is particularly noticeable in the numbers of Longford-born women in Ulster and married to local men there.

There was a change in the tone of church reports between 1920 and 1922, when departures from parishes were no longer attributed



Clockwise from above: Michael Collins, Seán Mac Eoin and Kevin O'Higgins at the funeral of Arthur Griffith. Mac Eoin, aka 'The Blacksmith of Ballinalee', was leader of the IRA's Longford brigade at the time William Charters and William Elliott were executed; St John's Church of Ireland church; the Old Rectory in Ballinalee village, where Rev Henry Johnson once lived; and Dr Marie Coleman



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to emigration but to the unsettled political state of the country. IRA activity was centred in the north of the county around Ballinalee. The local Church of Ireland rector Rev Henry Johnson attributed departures in 1921 to the "troublesome [sic] times through which we have been passing" and in 1922 to "local disturbances". The number of children presented for examinations in his parish Sunday schools declined by 69pc between 1920 and 1923.

Two of Johnson's parishioners were the victims of the most high-profile attack on local Protestants during the revolution; in January 1921 the IRA executed William Charters and William Elliott on charges of spying that appear to have been well-founded. They were the first civilians and only Protestants executed in the county by the IRA. It seems they were targeted for their actions rather than their religion. Five

civilians were shot as alleged spies in Longford, the other three of whom were Catholics.

The killing of Charters and Elliott appears to have deterred other Protestants from actions that would incur the IRA's wrath, yet the atmosphere of fear is likely to explain why many families left during these years. The highest point of departure appears to have been in mid-1922, when local newspaper advertisements show a noticeable increase in the number of Protestants trying to sell their property.

Robert Fee, a substantial Methodist farmer from Trillick-a-Temple moved to Northern Ireland in 1923 and his son Rev John Fee later attributed this forced departure to IRA intimidation. Yet, as Fee was notably more prosperous than his Catholic neighbours, an element of land envy cannot not be ruled out. By 1926 non-Catholics remained disproportionately the owners of the county's largest farms.

Local circumstances explain some movement. All three denominations witnessed substantial decreases in their Longford town parishioner numbers after 1922 and this is likely to be attributable to the departure of the British garrison.

A number of factors explain Longford's Protestant depopulation between 1911 and 1926. While the trend was well under way due to emigration and demographic shifts before the revolutionary period, it undoubtedly increased dramatically at the height of the political unrest between 1920 and 1922. Nevertheless, when peace was restored in 1923, some Protestants returned after temporary exile and many opted to remain in the Free State.

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## Silver bullet mystery: two farmers shot in the night *Irish Independent*

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County Court Judge Fleming at Longford awarded £1,000 compensation to the representatives of William George Elliott and £1,200 to the father of William Charters, two farmers who on the night of January 22 were taken from their houses and shot, the body of Charters being subsequently discovered in a lake.

It was stated that on the body of

Elliott was discovered a postcard from a friend in another part of the country bearing the word "spy" written in pencil on top, evidently done before the card reached its destination.

Rev J Johnstone said where Charters' body was found a silver bullet was got. Until then he thought both cases were similar, but he changed his mind a little owing to that circumstance.

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