

Irish War of Independence

Ireland was not though a peaceful place to live at this time. The British general election of 1918 saw the Home Rule party obliterated by Sinn Féin. Their rise to prominence was as a direct result of the extreme manner that the British dealt with the Easter Rising of 1916, making martyrs of the leaders. The population at large turned to Sinn Féin to gain independence for Ireland rather than the Home Rule party which wanted a parliament for Ireland but still part of the United Kingdom. The 73 newly elected Sinn Féin MPs refused to go to Westminster and so the 27 who were free (all the others were in Gaol) met in January 1919 and drew up an Irish Declaration of independence and took the title 'Dáil Éireann' for their Dublin parliament. In March the British released all the Sinn Féin prisoners to try and calm the public mood. But the first shots of the war of independence were fired in the early months of 1919. The very day that the Dáil Éireann was set up in Dublin the first casualty of the IRA was killed in Soloheadbeg, Co. Tipperary. The war was a guerilla war with small skirmishes rather than battle lines and trenches.

The war ground on until 1921 until both sides were ready for peace. The British realised they could never win the war, the IRA that while they could never lose, they could never really win either. In July 1921 a truce was agreed. The 1920 Government of Ireland Act had split the country and created Northern Ireland with its own parliament in Belfast. Northern Ireland remained very much a part of the United Kingdom and so the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 was negotiated in London in October 1921 against this background. After two months the Irish leaders under Michael Collins duly signed and the Irish Free State was born. The Irish could have its own parliament, army, police force but would continue to recognise the British King as the head of state and the country would be permanently partitioned.

The treaty split Sinn Féin and the IRA but after Collins had led the debate in the Dáil, the treaty was passed in January 1922 by sixty-four to fifty-seven. The treaty would be honoured.

In March 1922 a group of extreme republicans led by Rory O'Connor took over the Four Courts in Dublin. The first week of the civil war was the bloodiest, as central Dublin was devastated for the second time in ten years. The garrison in the Four Courts were shelled into submission. And as we know many of the historical documents of Ireland were destroyed in the fire that ensued including the census documents from 1821-1861.

After the defeat in Dublin the war moved to the Irish countryside where men who fought shoulder to shoulder a year earlier now turned on each other. The Republican cause was doomed from the start. They had to try the same guerilla tactics as before but now against the Free State Forces who had the support of the majority of the population. Only in Munster (Limerick and Waterford included) could they rely on strong support. In the first Free State election held just before the outbreak of fighting the Republicans only polled 22 percent of the vote. By mid 1923 the Republican leaders realised that further struggle was useless. In May they lay down their guns and the war ended without treaty or talks. The bitterness lingered for many years and former friends and family would never speak again.

Should this Certificate be lost, or mislaid, no duplicate
of it can be obtained.

Certificate No. 20521

ROYAL IRISH CONSTABULARY.
Form $\frac{37}{3}$
Certificate of Character. (*)

On discharge of No. 53771 (Rank) Sergeant
(Name) Michael Fitzgerald who joined the
above-named Force on the 16th day of May 1889,
and was discharged on the 10th day of April 1922,
in consequence of (†) Demobilization

His general conduct during the period of his service
was Very Good

DESCRIPTION ON DISCHARGE.

Age, 50 years Height, 5 ft 9 ins
Colour of Hair, Grey Colour of Eyes, Hazel
Complexion, Fresh
Special distinguishing }
Marks, (if any) } /

Parish and County where born, Athlone, Westmeath
Single, Married, or Widower, Widower

Given under my hand and seal at Ship St. Barracks this 10th
day of April 1922.

Signature H. F. Taylor
Rank Co. Inspector of (1) Galway & R.

(*) This Certificate is given without any alteration, or erasure.
(†) Insert here the circumstances under which the discharge takes place.
(‡) Insert name of County.

(1916) Wk. S. T. 3204—15. 2. 17, 1911. 1. 22. S. T. & Co., Ltd.

I add this to flavour what life might have been like in Ireland in the period 1919 to 1923. It is of course very relevant to our story as due to the formation of the Irish Free State and the creation of the Garda Siochana, the Royal Irish Constabulary was disbanded. Michael (Jnr.) was discharged from the RIC on the 10th April. Here is the “Certificate of Character” he was given on that occasion.

It is interesting to note that his height on leaving the force is one inch greater than when he signed up as an 18 year old. His daughter Marian Wurr recalled that he went on ahead to England in the June to make arrangements for the family. Gerald seems to have already left for Argentina so Kathleen was left in charge. Michael (Jnr.) was very unhappy to learn, later, that they were set upon by some from the town who were venting their dislike of the RIC. Some came into the house but Kathleen sent them packing. Marian Wurr in her recollections said it was not personal just against the RIC and the system. As far as she was concerned her father had been a good and fair RIC man. He gave them no specific reason to set on the family.

The family dared not take all their belongings with them beyond a few clothes and personal items. They were sure that the furniture would be destroyed as they waited at the station. Therefore they organised a sale. The piano was much admired



Gerald Fitzgerald Centre

by a friend who used to come and play it, therefore she upped the value they got for that. Other friends came and upped the bidding but even those items that sold well went for a fraction of their value. There were a pair of oil paintings in big gilt frames and a lovely table. All went. Marian remembered her mother had regularly entertained with her lovely china but this too was left. Leaving for England put a stop to John's education. His teachers were keen he stay as he had, it was alleged, got the best results in Ireland in some subjects. But Marian Wurr was sure her brother, who was a real home bird, would have missed them all too much and pined away.



Marian Wurr, October 1921



Marian, Eveline and Kathleen Fitzgerald



Eveline Fitzgerald