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THE **WAR** OF
INDEPENDENCE

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the lead-up to war

AT MEENBANAD, a plateau halfway between Kincasslagh and Dungloe in the Rosses of Donegal, stands a slab monument with the following inscription in Irish and English:

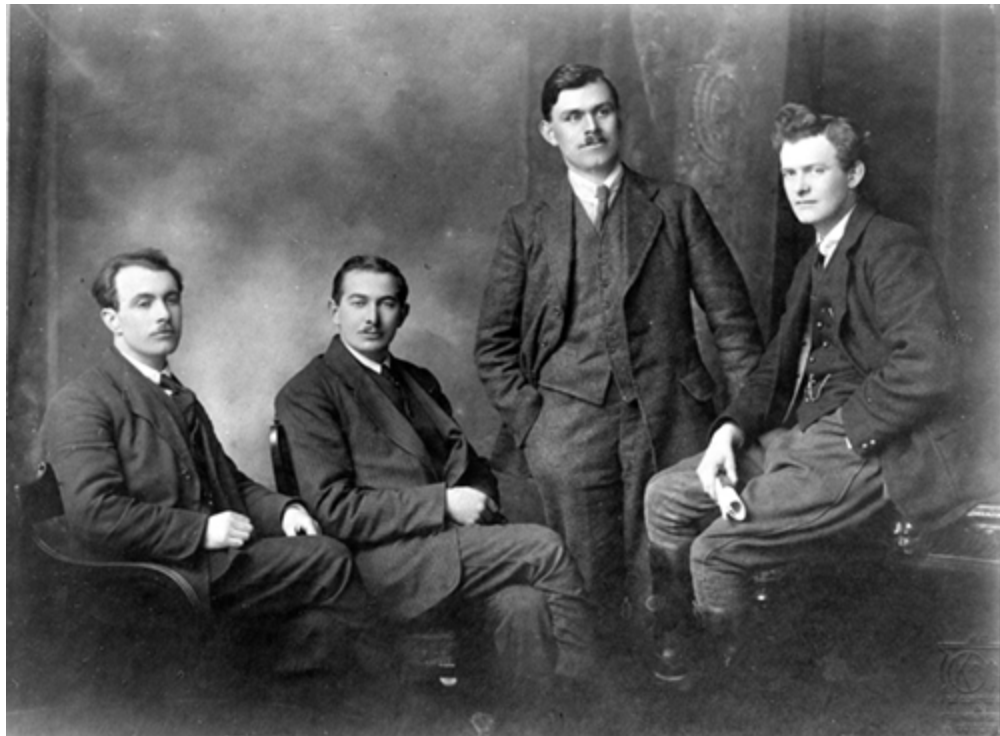
To commemorate the first action in the War of Independence; when the Irish Volunteers rescued two comrades, James Ward & James Duffy, from British Troops at this place on the 4th day of January 1918.

‘This place’ was then the last railway halt (known officially as Kincasslagh Road) before the terminus of the Londonderry and Lough Swilly Railway at Burtonport, and the Volunteers were removed from the train that was to take them to imprisonment in Derry. The action, carried out by a party of local men that included Fergus Ward and the brothers Dom and John Bonner, antedated by a year and seventeen days the incident that is conventionally regarded as the beginning of the Anglo-Irish War.

It was the first of several indications that constitutional methods of achieving the aim of ‘old Ireland free’ had been thrust aside by the Irish Volunteers. Unlike the majority of later incidents, however, it was bloodless - in sharp contrast to the action at Soloheadbeg, County Tipperary, on 21 January 1919 that resulted in the shooting of two policemen who were supervising the transport of gelignite

to a quarry. That raid, carried out by nine Volunteers including Dan Breen and Seán Treacy, illustrated the daring and ruthlessness of the Volunteers and marked out members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) as the most vulnerable part of the 'enemy'.

Like the Meenbanad operation, the Soloheadbeg raid was carried out on local initiative, without sanction from either the Volunteers' central command or the politicians who were, on that same day, taking their seats in Dáil Éireann, the new Irish parliament.



Irish Volunteers (l. to r.) Seumas Robinson, Seán Treacy, Dan Breen and Michael Brennan c. 1919. (Mercier Archive)

The Irish Volunteers had been set up in 1913 by Irish nationalists in response to the setting up of the unionist

Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in the north of the country. While the UVF opposed the introduction of Home Rule, which would have given the island limited self-governance, the Irish Volunteers supported this promised parliamentary reform. However, with the start of the First World War, the postponement of the implementation of Home Rule, and the split of the Irish Volunteers, the new goal of the remaining, much reduced Volunteers quickly became full independence for Ireland. When the Easter Rising of 1916 failed, it was realised by the surviving leaders of the Volunteers that new tactics would be needed.

The Irish Constabulary had been created as a paramilitary, well-armed force in 1836 ('royal' was added in 1867, as a reward for its success in fighting the Fenian rebellion in that year), but by the later decades of the nineteenth century it had become essentially a civil constabulary. By 1919 it had many long-serving members and was not equipped to fight the guerrilla tactics that would be used by the Volunteers in this new conflict. Its members were conscious, too, that, whatever the outcome of the protracted political process, their days as a force were numbered; uncertainty about the future did not help morale.



A senior RIC officer. (Mercier Archive)

The other Irish police force, the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP), was formed in the same year as the RIC, but its members were unarmed and prided themselves on being taller and grander than the RIC men.

By the time the Truce came into effect on 11 July 1921, the numbers of those killed comprised 433 police (including DMP officers), and over 1,000 military, IRA and civilians. The latter category is necessarily blurred, since it included not only active Volunteers and, to use the modern euphe-

mism, 'collateral' casualties, but also at least a hundred people that the local IRA commanders designated, often unjustly, as 'spies'. The 'collaterals' included people caught in crossfire, those who had 'failed to halt when challenged' by military or police patrols and, in a few cases, women and children killed in raids.



Members of the DMP.
(Mercier Archive)

The roots of the conflict in Ireland lay in the British

government's attitude towards the idea of Irish self-government. The need for the preservation of the union had exercised the minds of most British (and all Conservative) statesmen since the time of Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850). (It was his name, first associated with the early constabulary, the Peace Preservation Force formed in 1814, that caused the RIC to be known universally as 'Peelers'.) Peel believed that despite Ireland being endlessly troublesome (except for the loyal counties of the north-east), this was a small price to pay for the maintenance of the integrity of the growing British Empire.

By the time of the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, at the height of Britain's imperial power, the most that even the most liberal politician would contemplate was some kind of weak dominion status for the still-troublesome Irish. Even that seemed far away until the general election of 1910 left the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), led by John Redmond, holding the balance of power in the Liberal government's coalition. Redmond demanded Home Rule for Ireland in return for his party's support, and in 1912 the British prime minister, Herbert Henry Asquith, introduced the third Home Rule Bill to the House of Commons, which, if passed into law, would once again give Ireland its own parliament, albeit one with restricted powers.