

A Commemorative Project: The Decade of Centenaries and The Irish Diaspora on Tyneside

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Aims:

- To explore the Irish Independence movement on Tyneside between 1921 and 1923.
- To offer appropriate techniques of commemoration with regards to the Tyneside Irish Independence movement

Importance

Recent commemorations of the First World War and the Irish Revolution have re-ignited debates on memory and commemoration. These events including the Great War (1914-18) and the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) were vital as each country suffered huge loss of life, rapid political change and the birth of the modern Irish state.

These national commemorations seek to create a specific remembrance of events known as ‘official history’ and have been transformed into memorials and annual commemorations. Most recently and most notably, the May 2011 Queen’s State visit to Ireland and Irish Head of State Michael O’Higgins’ visit in April 2014 symbolised the recognition and importance both countries lay on commemoration of events that profoundly changed the nature of the relationship between the two islands. This shows that memory and commemoration can be used as a political tool, in this case for peace and building Anglo-Irish relations.

For regional history, it is important to understand the experiences of all sections of a particular group in society as previously, the Irish on Tyneside have been well documented but the Irish Independence movement has received little attention.



Sinking colliery shafts was a job mainly done by the Irish
 Picture: Sheen, *Tyneside Irish*

Evidence

Main primary sources used to explore and establish the Irish Independence movement on Tyneside were:

- **Military Service Pensions Collection from the Military Archives, Ireland**
- **Witness Statement from the Bureau of Military History**
- **Irish Genealogical Sources from the Dun Laoghaire Genealogical Society**
- **Local newspapers archives such as the Newcastle Evening Chronicle**

Membership: through the testament of Gilbert F. Barrington (Tyneside IRA Brigade Quartermaster) there were over **480 men** of English birth enlisted.

By 1921, there were ten companies in operation in Jarrow, Hebburn, Newcastle upon Tyne, Wallsend, Bedlington, Consett, Stockton-On-Tees, Chester-Le-Street, Thornley and Wheatley Hill and Sunderland.

Operation: small-scale with comparatively little violence to events in Ireland and no fatalities as a result of their operation however, played a considerable role in carrying weapons and ammunition to other IRA Units in England such as those more violent in Liverpool and Manchester. The group, however, caused considerable damage to farms and local industry.



Newcastle Evening Chronicle, October 20th 1921

Commemoration

The main question surrounding the commemoration of the Irish Independence movement on Tyneside is how its commemoration can be incorporated into the existing community.

There is a ‘**conflict of memory**’ with regards to the commemoration of the period 1914-1923 as during the Great War (1914-1918) the region remembers and pays tribute to the British Army and most notably the **Tyneside Irish Brigade**. This is in stark contrast with commemoration in Ireland as the role of Irishmen in the First World War has been neglected in very recent national commemoration.

The events of this period are in direct conflict with the intentions and actions of the Tyneside IRA as it was thought unpatriotic as hundreds of thousands of Irishmen were fighting in the British army overseas.

Therefore the commemoration of the Tyneside IRA should be viewed as an ‘**alternative history**’: even though the groups actions were at odds with those in ‘**official memory**’, there was still a significant movement which is important for the Irish diaspora and for regional history. On top of this, there were members

of the Tyneside IRA who were demobilised soldiers from the First World War therefore this highlights important debates on ‘**dual belonging**’ – the idea that belonging to these two different groups create of conflict of identity.

This project is a source of information to those who wish to find out more; whether it be for genealogical research or to gain an understanding of the complex political situation between Britain and Ireland, one hundred years ago.



Photograph: *The Burning of Cork*, National Library of Ireland

Future prospects

- There is a positive and expanding level of interdisciplinary research into regional and local history of the North East of England and this project provides an ‘alternative history’ to existing works in an area that has previously received little consideration but during a time period that has received considerable commemorative attention.
- This project highlights areas of extreme significance in regional history such as ‘**dual belonging**’ with regards to the idea that members of the Tyneside IRA were also demobilised soldiers. An answer to these fascinating questions is unlikely to be found as the time that has passed since the events mean all members likely to answer these debates are deceased. However, this project would hugely benefit from any further information or sources given from families of those enlisted under the Tyneside IRA, in order to give a better understanding of the movement.
- Working with *Century Ireland*, I was able to explore different forms of presenting history to the public as in Ireland, there are numerous organisations and projects in place for the *Decade of Centenaries*. The range of resources available can be applied to other commemorative projects such as this.

Table 1: *IRA Operations in Britain, October 1920–July 1921**

| | Arson | | Sabotage | Robbery | | Shootings | |
|------------|-----------|-------|-----------|---------|------------|-----------|-------|
| | Buildings | Other | Telegraph | Arms | Explosives | Police | Other |
| London | 22 | 36 | 38 | 2 | — | — | 7 |
| Liverpool | 52 | 4 | 41 | — | — | — | 1 |
| Manchester | 51 | 12 | 1 | — | — | 5 | 1 |
| Tyneside | 15 | 54 | 4 | — | — | — | — |
| Teeside | 7 | 21 | 2 | — | — | — | — |
| Lancashire | 2 | 1 | — | — | 2 | — | — |
| Yorkshire | — | — | — | 2 | 2 | — | — |
| Birmingham | — | 2 | — | 1 | — | — | — |
| Scotland | 5 | 10 | 5 | 3 | 13 | 3 | — |
| Total | 154 | 140 | 91 | 8 | 17 | 8 | 9 |

Diagram: Hart, ‘Operations Abroad’: The IRA in Britain, 1919-23

With thanks to...

