

'James Durney once again brings forth a less well-known aspect of the War of Independence, that of internment. Vital reading for anyone interested in the Irish revolution.' – *Liz Gillis*



INTERINED

The Curragh Internment Camps in the War of Independence

James Durney

INTERNEED

The Curragh Internment Camps in the War of Independence

James Durney



MERCIER PRESS

INTRODUCTION

From 1916, faced with armed insurrection and revolutionary claims to democratic legitimacy, the British government responded with increasingly harsh emergency powers against Irish republicans. An important weapon in the government's fight against republican violence was internment, or imprisonment, without trial. The purpose of this was to contain people believed by the British authorities to be a threat, without bringing charges against them, or having the intent to file any.¹

It was in the immediate aftermath of Bloody Sunday, on 21 November 1920, that the British authorities decided to open internment camps in Ireland, facilitating a record use of imprisonment without trial. These camps, rather than established prisons, quickly became the largest holding centres of political prisoners. By late June 1921, 3,311 men were interned in the camps, constituting just over half of all those then incarcerated because of the War of Independence. As conditions in the country became more militarised, the circumstances of most imprisoned men came to appear similar to those of prisoners of war, a status the British authorities did not want to grant them. From the start of the conflict the British government had refused to concede that there was a war in Ireland, as claimed by Irish republicans, and by strengthening the police rather than the military it could justify the conflict as mere 'civil disorder'. However, the

opening of internment camps and the use of the military as guards helped to dispel this myth.

Despite the negative optics, internment was an easier option for the British than the long-drawn-out process of court-martialing republicans. In addition, republican prisoners had regularly demanded their transfer from convict prisons to special camps as part of their campaign for recognition as prisoners of war. Consequently, the British authorities believed that the camps would be more secure and that prisoners would be less trying, and more easily managed, if held in specially designed internment camps. However, Irish republicans in the Curragh internment camps proved enthusiastically that this was not to be.

INTERMENT

The outbreak of war between Britain and Germany in August 1914 led to the enactment of the Defence of the Realm Act 1914, for the purposes of securing public safety in Britain and Ireland. The act, usually referred to as DORA, governed all citizens in Britain and Ireland during the years 1914–18. The legislation gave the government executive powers to suppress published criticism, control civilian behaviour, imprison without trial, and to commandeer economic resources for the war effort. DORA was amended and extended six times as the First World War progressed, and when war broke out in Ireland, with subsequent amendments, became the most relevant enactment for the suppression of political violence there.¹

On the outbreak of the European war, the leaderships of the Irish Volunteers and the Ulster Volunteer Force pledged their support for the British war effort, mainly to strengthen their respective hands at the post-war bargaining table. The Irish Volunteers, however, split on this issue, and a minority group, heavily influenced by the secretive Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), began planning an insurrection to exploit Britain's wartime difficulties.

At Easter 1916 this IRB-influenced group, together with the Irish Citizen Army, occupied positions in the centre of Dublin and declared an Irish Republic. The immediate British

response was to issue two proclamations. One announced the imposition of martial law; the other, under Section 1 of the Defence of the Realm (Amendment) Act 1915, suspended the right to jury trial for breaches of the regulations, and thus created in Ireland an extensive court-martial jurisdiction.²

Militarily, the Rising was a failure. In the aftermath, a total of 3,340 men and seventy-nine women were taken prisoner or rounded up in countrywide raids. A lack of evidence against those arrested, however, meant that most of them were interned rather than prosecuted. But British intelligence had left much to be desired, as many of the prisoners were innocent, and 1,424 were released within a fortnight without charge.³ Fifteen of the prisoners were court-martialled and executed by firing squad during 3–12 May 1916. The rest were held under the Defence of the Realm Act 14B (internment without trial) and transferred to prisons in Britain.⁴

Twenty-five men arrested in Co. Kildare were initially held at Hare Park Camp, first built in 1915 to billet large numbers of troops training on the Curragh. The camp took its name from its location on the edge of the former Kildare Hunt Club Hare Park site. The Kildare prisoners were held at Hare Park until 8 May, when they were conveyed from the Curragh to Richmond Military Barracks in Dublin; from there they were subsequently deported to prisons in England.⁵ Their internment was short-lived, as most of the prisoners were released unconditionally in December 1916.

The Curragh Camp continued to be a place of detention for republicans as Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers re-

organised in early 1917 and began to confront Britain's Irish policy. When Thomas Ashe, the Easter Week hero of the Battle of Ashbourne, was arrested in Dublin in August 1917, having made what was termed a seditious speech in Ballinalee, Co. Longford, he was conveyed to the Curragh Camp and detained in the cells adjoining the guardroom at Keane Barracks. James Grehan, from Co. Laois, was arrested for illegal drilling and housed in a neighbouring cell. Michael Collins, then of the Irish National Aid Association, travelled from Dublin to the Curragh to visit both men – Collins was at that time a largely unknown entity to the British authorities. How it must have rankled with Dublin Castle some years later, when Collins had become such a thorn in their side, to know that he had visited the centre of the British military in Ireland.⁶

In the general election of December 1918, Sinn Féin successfully supplanted the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), winning seventy-three seats from a total of 105 and receiving 46.9 per cent of the vote island-wide. They quickly moved to set up an alternative parliament on 21 January 1919, known as Dáil Éireann – 'National Assembly' – and declare an Irish Republic.⁷ On the same day the Volunteers, now increasingly known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), began their military campaign against the crown forces with an attack on the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) in Soloheadbeg, Co. Tipperary, which left two policemen dead. Though it was not sanctioned by general headquarters (GHQ), this was the first deliberate killing of state security forces by the IRA.⁸

The escalation of the war from 1919 led to the strengthening of the Defence of the Realm Act, but the use of DORA legislation in response to the Irish conflict was nearing the end of its life, as the power to issue regulations was only exercisable 'during the continuance of the present war', meaning the First World War. It was a war emergency law that was meant to lapse at the end of hostilities in Europe. The old Crimes Act was used to create Special Military Areas, which allowed the authorities to control movement and ban public events, but without DORA it was impossible to continue interning republicans.⁹

In January 1920 a new internment policy was implemented, involving co-operation between the military and police. The British government put into effect a policy of moving prisoners to English jails to diminish any threat or influence they would have on the campaign in Ireland. On 5 April prisoners in Dublin's Mountjoy Gaol began a mass hunger strike, demanding that DORA internees should be treated as political prisoners. Viscount French, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, said there would be no concessions to the prisoners, but the situation reached a crisis point with the resignation of the prison's chief medical officer. The strikers turned down an offer of 'ameliorative' treatment; more men joined the strike bringing the number to ninety. A one-day labour strike added to the tension and distressing scenes were witnessed outside the prison as relatives and supporters awaited news. Dublin Castle then conceded the hunger strikers' demand for political status, only to be presented promptly with a demand

for their release; when liberation on parole was offered, the internees demanded unconditional release. On advice from the British government, the authorities in Mountjoy relented and transferred the hunger strikers en masse to hospitals for convalescence as a precursor to immediate release. The military programme of arrests since January, the impact of which had been growing steadily, was thrown into turmoil.¹⁰

New legislation was needed, and the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act (ROIA) was introduced on 9 August 1920 to deal with the rising republican violence and the collapse of the British civilian administration. (The army would pronounce ROIA procedures ‘too slow and cumbrous to be really effective against a whole population in rebellion’.) The act permitted the government to continue, under a new label, most of the restrictions imposed under DORA.¹¹ In most cases this alteration was carried out by the substitution of the phrase ‘restoration or maintenance of order in Ireland’ for ‘the public safety or defence of the realm’.¹² Consequently, DORA 14B, allowing internment without trial, became Restoration of Order in Ireland Regulation (ROIR) 14B.¹³

Over seventy regulations were made under the ROIA Act – civil law was practically revoked. Military and naval authorities were empowered to jail any Irish man or woman without charge or trial under Section 3 (6). Section 3 (1–5) provided for the replacement of trial by jury with courts martial in those areas where IRA activity was prevalent, and an extension of the jurisdiction of courts martial to include capital offences. In addition, military courts of inquiry were

substituted for coroners' inquests. This was mainly because (up to August 1920) thirty-three coroners' inquests had indicted military or police personnel for murder. In addition, the regulations provided for the withholding of grants, otherwise payable from public funds, from local authorities that refused to discharge statutory obligations.¹⁴

However, the introduction of ROIA was followed by a general increase in IRA activities, which culminated in the shooting dead of twelve British intelligence agents on 21 November 1920 in Dublin. The immediate British response was to resort to internment on an unprecedented scale and an overall intensification of the counter-insurgency drive, with full use made of the new regulations. On 22 November orders were given to 'arrest all leaders of the IRA and other "wanted men" and to intern them, should conviction for offences be unobtainable in Ireland'. From that point, if there was not enough evidence to secure a conviction, the military authority was assigned to forward the names of known republicans for internment.¹⁵

'The great round-up,' the *Irish Independent* reported, 'of prominent Sinn Feiners and public men in the provinces within the last few days appears to have been on a larger scale than that after the 1916 insurrection. The hundreds of arrests which have taken place do not appear to have been the result of anything found on the premises of the men, as in many cases the men were asked for and no search was made.'¹⁶

In the two weeks following Bloody Sunday, 500 internment orders were made and hundreds of men rounded up.

According to *The Freeman's Journal*, a 'high authority' source said: 'We are going over Ireland with a fine-comb.' The new internees were to be held in internment camps 'until such time as they can be safely tried'.¹⁷

The *Donegal News* of 4 December said: 'At the present moment there are close on seventeen hundred Irishmen locked up in British jails, and the present intention is to round up something like five thousand. Preparations have been made for the reception of that number, and it is the belief of [Sir Hamar] Greenwood and his advisers that when five thousand Irishmen are in prison, the Sinn Fein movement will be effectively smashed.'

Temporary internment camps were hastily opened at Dollymount, on the north coast of Dublin Bay, and Collinstown, in north Co. Dublin, where the British Army had established a training camp and an airfield during the First World War. Meanwhile, a permanent camp was being prepared at Ballykinlar, on Dundrum Bay in Co. Down.¹⁸ The former British military training camp there had been identified as the most appropriate location for this and thus became the first mass internment camp in Ireland when it opened in early December 1920 to receive its first batch of prisoners from Arbour Hill Prison in Dublin.¹⁹

There were two internment camps at Ballykinlar, usually distinguished as Camp I and Camp II. Though these two camps adjoined each other for a short distance at one end, being separated only by the double fence of barbed wire that surrounded each camp, they were isolated from each other,

and communication between the prisoners in one camp and those in the other was forbidden. Three sides of the camp were surrounded by the sea, which simplified the problem of guarding the prisoners. Each camp held (when full) 1,000 prisoners. These were divided, for purposes of administration, into four companies (250 men in each), and each company was housed in ten huts (twenty-five men to each hut). In addition to the huts in which the men slept, the camp buildings included large central huts for use as a chapel, dining hall, recreation area (for concerts, etc.), canteen, cookhouse and workshops.²⁰

On 27 November a *Belfast Newsletter* correspondent wrote: 'The internment indicates the acceptance in a certain sense of the Republican Army's declaration of a state of war and their demand for treatment as prisoners of war.' The *Belfast Telegraph* concurred: 'Men will be liable to be interned without trial, and membership of the Irish Republican Army will be sufficient reason for this treatment.'²¹

The British system of internment against Irish republicans was described as follows:

[Army] Divisions submitted to GHQ lists of men they wished to intern, giving their believed rank in the IRA. These lists were examined at GHQ and forwarded to the Chief Secretary with application for internment warrants. Owing to delay in the issue of warrants and the congestion which would have occurred in divisional areas had the arrested men been retained until the warrants were received, divisions were authorised to

ship to Ballykinlar batches of men whose internment had been approved, as and when shipping facilities became available, the internment warrants were then sent direct from GHQ to the Commandant of the internment camp.²²

The main difficulty experienced was found to be one of identity, and in many cases the civilian authorities did not know enough about the suspect to put the correct name on the requisite form, so the military authorities sometimes had trouble in fitting the warrants to the individuals arrested. Many men were interned wrongfully, while others were interned under an incorrect name. The military authorities insisted on attributing an IRA rank to all of those interned – though they were not as successful as they believed in doing this and gave officer ranks to many who were not. Likewise, members of the British government were keen to claim that all the internees were ‘believed to be active members of the Irish Republican Army’.²³

Internment powers continued to be used on a massive scale as the War of Independence entered the new and most crucial year of 1921. According to Dublin Castle, by the last week of December 1920, 995 internment orders had been issued and 800 men interned at Ballykinlar, which at that time only had a capacity of 1,000.²⁴ By 17 January 1921 the number of internees had risen to 1,478 and, with no let-up in arrests, additional internment places had to be established.²⁵ In January 1921 an internment camp was opened at the former military installation at Bere Island in Co. Cork.²⁶

The following month another camp was opened at Fort Westmoreland, the military fortress on Spike Island in Cork Harbour, which before 1885 had been the chief depot for Irish convicts. It was expected to accommodate 500 men and, because of its location, was believed to be escape-proof.²⁷

In the week ending 21 February 1921 a further 507 men had been arrested, bringing the total number of internees to 1,985.²⁸ Greater capacity was required to deal with this growing number of detainees. To supplement this, another internment camp was constructed on the Curragh plains some 400 metres north-west of the Gibbet Rath to house about 1,300 men. Known as the Rath Camp, it took its name from the historic Gibbet Rath – a large Viking-era enclosure which was also the scene of a massacre of rebels during the 1798 rebellion.²⁹ On 12 March 1921 the *Leinster Leader* reported: ‘Another internment camp, conducted on the same lines as the Ballykinlar Camp, has been opened at the Rath, Curragh. A large number of prisoners have been transferred from the Hare Park Camp to the Rath, where no visits are allowed.’³⁰



The 'Sinn Féin Barber' John Murray and some of his clients, Rath Camp.
(Courtesy of Fr Peter Clancy Collection)



Above: Internee Sylvester Delahunt, Straffan, Co. Kildare. (Courtesy of Áine Delahunt)

Left: Fr Patrick Smith, the internees' revered chaplain. (Courtesy of Jim Doyle)

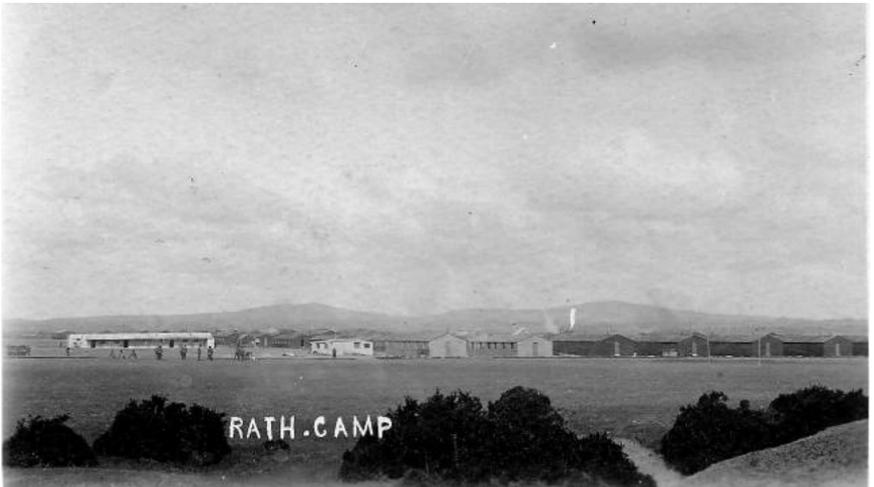


A group of internees with a guard tower in the background, Rath Camp.
(Courtesy of Áine Delahunty)



Volunteer internees from the North Kildare Battalion pose for a photo in the Rath Camp. (Courtesy of Áine Delahunty)

A guard tower
and barbed wire
at the Rath
Camp. (Author's
Collection)



The Rath Internment Camp, the Curragh.
(Courtesy of Local Studies, Genealogy and Archives Dept,
Newbridge Library)

During the War of Independence, faced with an armed insurrection it couldn't stop, the British government introduced increasingly harsh penalties for suspected republicans, including internment without trial. This led to the incarceration of thousands of men in camps around the country, including the Rath and Hare Park camps at the Curragh in County Kildare. *Interned* is the first book to tell the story of the men who were held in the Curragh internment camps, which housed republicans from all over Ireland. Faced with harsh conditions, intolerant guards and inadequate and often inedible food, the prisoners maintained their defiance of the British regime and took whatever chances they could to defy their gaolers, including a number of audacious escapes. With details of life in the camps, of escapes that included the greatest tunnel breakout during the war, when sixty men got away, and a comprehensive list of those who spent time there, this book is a fascinating history of the men who suffered so Ireland could be free.

www.mercierpress.ie

ISBN 978-1-78117-588-0



9 781781 175880

MERCIER HISTORY