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The disbanded Royal Irish Constabulary and forced migration, 1922–31

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ABSTRACT

This article concerns the men of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) who were disbanded from the force in 1922 and felt obliged to leave Ireland for Britain. Afforded unique – if not always entirely sufficient – financial and practical arrangements by the British government, this was in many respects a distinctive but particularly well documented cohort of Irish migrants. While the RIC was an exclusively male force, disbandment and migration also impacted on the wives and children of married members. The article will first examine the nature of migration under threat of republican violence for Irish-born, disbanded RIC members. It will then explore forced separation and the experiences of police families, before offering some reflections on what this case-study can tell us about contemporary understanding of gender and violence.

KEYWORDS

Royal Irish Constabulary; Irish Revolution; migration; disbandment; gendered violence

Introduction

When the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) was disbanded in 1922 it still had some 8000 Irish-born members. These included both “old-RIC” who joined before the War of Independence began in earnest and “Black and Tans” recruited after 1920. Most were Catholic. A significant proportion – threatened directly or indirectly with republican violence, facing a return to civilian life in a potentially hostile environment, and unable to support themselves and their families indefinitely – left the twenty-six counties that became the Irish Free State either temporarily or permanently. Individual motivations are notoriously difficult to disentangle, but for the purposes of this article this is treated as forced rather than voluntary migration. It was described as compulsion rather than choice by the migrants themselves, and generally accepted as such by British authorities (if not necessarily their Irish counterparts). While the actual threat of violence is difficult to gauge, several ex-RIC were killed in 1922 and many more had received personal warnings or were aware of broader threats against former members of the force.¹ As with much voluntary emigration there was a clear economic imperative tied to the loss of employment, but these jobs had also been lost through the dismantling of a police force that was deemed incompatible with the Irish Free State founded under the Anglo-Irish Treaty. And while discrimination should not be overstated – many former colleagues continued to live and work in Ireland relatively freely – there was genuine reason to suspect a recent career in the service of the Crown would mean diminished prospects in the new state.

This article will use a study of these men to offer new perspectives on revolutionary violence and post-independence migration. It draws on accounts by ex-RIC who sought assistance to leave Ireland or applied for compensation afterwards and the words of those who advocated on their behalf. The first section will examine the impact of forced migration on disbanded Irish policemen and their families, highlighting the consequences of revolution for some of its “losers” and in turn challenging neat chronologies of the period. This will be followed by some reflections on what the experiences of disbanded RIC families can tell us about contemporary understanding of gender and violence in revolutionary Ireland. As will be seen, the decisions made by these men were based on a series of complicated considerations about short-term risk versus long-term consequences, assumptions about the most likely victims of threatened violence, and about the types of violence that might be inflicted in a context where fatal shooting – a fear that could dominate other concerns – was usually reserved for men.

As Conor Heffernan has argued, a strong and imposing physique was valorised in the RIC and “associated with ideas of integrity, character, and morality.” This was, however, a form of masculinity developed to “uphold the status quo,” while the RIC sat in opposition to nationalists and their conceptions of masculinity as uncovered in Aidan Beatty’s recent work. While some republicans might admit that members were “men of fine physique” and “well trained,” and its successor force, An Garda Síochána, were later deemed worthy of the highest ideals of “national masculinity,” from 1917 the RIC were repeatedly denounced as “the eyes and ears of the British government,” “traitors,” and thus inferior men in nationalist and republican terms.² Moreover, as Jane McGaughey has noted, the “normative forms” of Ulster unionist masculinity were represented in public discourse by the Ulster Volunteer Force, the 36th (Ulster) Division, and even the Ulster Special Constabulary.³ The largely-Catholic RIC, meanwhile, was viewed with suspicion by sections of the Ulster unionist population (in the same way that Catholic ex-servicemen could be).⁴ For the disbanded RIC – now civilians and disarmed – their experiences were thus framed by challenges to their masculinity: to the right to work, to move freely between domestic and public spaces, and to provide for and protect their families.⁵ If physicality became, as Heffernan puts it, “an integral part of a masculine police identity” in the early twentieth century, the men discussed in this article were men whose physicality was made redundant by migration.⁶ Ultimately, they were faced with choices based on lived realities rather than communal representations.

Disbandment, forced migration, and temporary separation

The disbandment and dispersal of the RIC necessitated by the Anglo-Irish Treaty was staggered over the first eight months of 1922. In April, the RIC Deputy Inspector General, C.A. Walsh, advised that “the vast majority of both officers and men enlisted in Ireland will not be allowed on disbandment to remain . . . They will be compelled to leave the country and it is anticipated that most of them will remove to Great Britain.”⁷ Such fears were widely expressed. The former “police advisor” in Ireland, Major-General Henry Hugh Tudor, for instance, wrote that “any man who served in the police force is in danger of murder in Ireland.”⁸ A letter published in the *Constabulary Gazette* highlighted similar concerns about economic prospects: “There should be no delusions about our future, as all may take it for certain that, however small our pensions be, there will be no chance of

other employment in this country for ex-R.I.C. men.”⁹ A Dublin Castle official also pointed out that, as members were gathered in large centres to await disbandment, married men were separated from wives and children who “have to face local ostracism and petty persecution unprotected.” The latter were, as one county inspector put it, “worn with anxiety.”¹⁰ In reality, the experiences of disbanded policemen and their families in the Irish Free State varied significantly. Many settled into civilian life with little or no comment or disruption. Some remained in Ireland in spite of violence, threats, and boycotting. Others decided to leave. From a large sample of 6354 Irishmen disbanded from the RIC in 1922, Seán Willian Gannon has found that 2348 migrated to Britain or further afield.¹¹ This was often permanent, but it was also claimed that “the majority of the Force” returned to Ireland “within a comparatively short period.”¹²

In December 1922, the *Daily Mail* reported on a “little colony” of ex-RIC families in Letchworth, Hertfordshire. It described citizens of the Empire who had stoically borne their forced exile and were ready to settle and contribute to the metropole. “It was strange to meet these fine, perfectly disciplined men as refugees in a pretty English village,” a correspondent wrote:

The men are living primarily on their pensions . . . but they are all anxious to find posts in this country . . . and these splendid men, remarkable for their physique and intelligence, are being wasted. Their wives are delighted with the picturesque, well-built houses found for them . . . The women are very brave. The horrors and fears of the last five years are seen in their haunted eyes, but they seek to forget their sufferings in the pride of their pretty homes. The children, with the adaptability of youth, are already perfectly at home.¹³

The RIC’s reputation as a body of upright, physically impressive, and “perfectly disciplined men” had endured, but now seemed out of place.¹⁴ Reference to the waste of men from the “best police force in the world” was also a subtle slight on the failures of David Lloyd George’s coalition government, recently defeated by Andrew Bonar Law’s Conservatives in the November 1922 election, and the “banished” ex-RIC were, it was said, “gradually finding positions throughout the Empire.”¹⁵ Many of the other very substantial traumas inherent in the process of disbandment and migration itself, however, remained obscured.

Some of these experiences are recorded in the files of the RIC Tribunal, founded under the terms of disbandment for the force. Any member who was obliged to move his home to another place in Ireland or anywhere outside of Ireland, “owing to molestation or danger, or for any cause whatsoever,” was entitled to a disturbance allowance, granted immediately as an advance subject to a liability to account for it later to the Tribunal.¹⁶ By 1924, the Tribunal had dealt with “some 7000” accounts for disturbance allowances.¹⁷ A collection of surviving letters explaining failure to spend disturbance allowances by the specified date provide revealing insights into the practical issues surrounding this migration.¹⁸ As it was recognised that “Fresh employment will be hard to obtain,” a disbanded member could also apply to “load” a pension for two years to “enable him to live and maintain his family without other employment,” subject to RIC Tribunal approval. Similarly, it was possible with Tribunal approval to commute a portion of a pension to emigrate beyond Britain and Ireland, or to establish a business, purchase a farm, or in some cases a house.¹⁹ The Tribunal ultimately considered 1686 applications for emigration, approving 1568, and granted 1269 “home” commutations (“chiefly British

enlistments"). The emigrants included "a considerable number of the older members of the Force, all of whom were Irishmen," who in most cases went to "relatives in Irish Catholic communities established in Australia and the United States of America."²⁰

The RIC Tribunal was empowered to make recommendations for additional allowances in cases of "exceptional hardship," and this formed a large bulk of its work. Between 1922 and 1924, the Tribunal dealt with thousands of requests for increased disturbance allowances or commutation of pensions. It also awarded 1263 grants for the "re-establishment of men forced to leave their homes" whose personal effects had been damaged, stolen, or sold under "forced sale," and recommended 727 more grants on "other grounds of hardship."²¹ Separately, where a man was forced to leave home without his wife and children, he was entitled to a separation allowance for up to three months and 886 of these were ultimately awarded.²²

From October 1926 to February 1931, a Treasury-funded Irish Grants Committee (IGC) sat to deliberate on applications for compensation by southern Irish loyalists claiming to have suffered loss on account of their allegiance to the British government in Ireland. It was originally intended to exclude men who had been assisted by the RIC Tribunal, but while the IGC could ultimately not deal with matters already adjudicated by the Tribunal (such as losses on furniture after emigration, for example), applications by ex-RIC for other losses were treated individually on merit.²³ Among over 200 boxes of surviving claim files are a significant number from disbanded policemen forced, they say, to flee Ireland. Contained in these files, and those of the RIC Tribunal, are detailed accounts of the process of leaving Ireland rarely recorded so viscerally elsewhere. As with any compensation testimony, however, there is the potential for embellishment, fictionalisation, and even fraud (the former of which was common, though the latter appears to have been rare).²⁴ Concerned about its reputation and ability to safeguard its minority, the provisional government established in January 1922 was keen to make clear that most of those leaving the Free State area for Britain, or across the new border, were doing so by choice. Dáil secretary Diarmuid O'Hegarty told British official Lionel Curtis that it was "common knowledge" that a "considerable number have left on a plea of compulsion without any justification whatever for that plea."²⁵ Nevertheless, while it cannot be assumed that all compensation testimony was entirely genuine, there is enough repetition to draw broader conclusions.

In May 1922, the Kerry-born Conservative MP for York, Sir John Butcher, told the House of Commons that among the disbanded policemen who had been "forced to fly from their homes and take refuge in this country. . . . Many of them have not yet been able to bring their families."²⁶ For married men, temporary separation was a common experience, ranging from a few days to a number of months. Bringing a family across the sea at short notice also meant additional practical difficulties not experienced by single travellers and the unplanned and rushed nature of their departure further set these men apart from other Irish migrants. Patrick McDonagh had been wounded while carrying out his duty and after disbandment was, in his own words, "obliged to leave Ireland and abandon all I possess to save my life"; Timothy Murphy was "hunted out of Ireland"; Thomas Sullivan took a boat to London after he was "advised at the end of 24 hours that if I wanted to save my life I must leave the country."²⁷ Men like McDonagh, Murphy, and

Sullivan were among up to a quarter of the Irish-born men disbanded from the force to leave Ireland and their testimonies speak in many respects to a wider Protestant and loyalist experience in Ireland in 1922 and 1923.²⁸

Luke McMahon's detailed testimony is worth quoting at some length:

A few days after I was disbanded ... my house was broken into in Mountmellick by about a dozen of men who called themselves the I.R.A. they were armed with revolvers who threatened to shoot me & my wife and children they gave me twelve hours to clear out the house was ransacked by them ... I had to take a motor car next morning as far as Kildare and from there to Dublin by rail leaving my wife and family behind me in Mountmellick. After being a few days in Dublin, I crossed over to Birmingham where I remained for a few months looking for a house & employment but could find neither. I went from there to Southport and Preston, and then to Burnley Lancashire. After being about two months in Burnley I was able to procure two rooms for my wife & family at £1 per week, but was unable to find work. I had to go back to Ireland for my wife and family, stealing back by night. I was only a few hours in my own house, when I was again found out by the I.R.A. who again broke in my door by night and would have shot me only for the intervention of a friend. I had to start next morning alone, leaving my wife & family behind, and wait in Dublin for them to arrive a few days later when we started for Burnley Lancs. My wife was then so broken in health she was barely able to travel, and when we reached Burnley, she lay for months, seriously ill, and under the Doctors Care at heavy expense, after a few months she gave birth to a still born child. After being about twelve months in Burnley without work, as I wasn't able to pay high rent I had to leave for Northern Ireland where some friends lent me money to pay debts and get me a house with some land attached. My wife is so broken down in health she will never be the same, and I can never go back to live in the Free State.

When he arrived in Northern Ireland, McMahon claimed that he had to "borrow money on high interest to buy a house and a few bad acres of land, and put a bad house in repair ... I couldn't get a house in any town in Northern Ireland owing to the scarcity of houses and with a small pension trying to feed a cow in order to get a drop of milk for young and weak children."²⁹ While in some respects an extreme case, similar experiences were replicated to some degree or other for many loyalist migrants to Britain, as well as those who moved internally in Ireland (often to Dublin or across the border into Northern Ireland).³⁰

Disbanded policemen had unique access to several means of assistance in Britain unavailable to other loyalist migrants. As noted above, the British government granted disbanded men allowances for removal and emigration costs, and they could commute pensions to purchase homes, farms, or businesses.³¹ In addition, the Irish Office set up an accommodation bureau with headquarters in Chester to assist arriving ex-policemen to find suitable accommodation, and local police commissioners were asked to provide any assistance they could to those "endeavouring to establish a new home in this country."³² Housing whole families, however, was particularly problematic. In May 1922, Secretary of State for the Colonies Winston Churchill told the House of Commons that the accommodation bureau had "no difficulty in securing accommodation at reasonable rates in any part of the country for single men and married couples," but there had been "considerable difficulty in securing permanent accommodation for families with children." As an "emergency measure," the government had secured a boarding house in London.³³ The RIC resettlement branch also assisted over 1400 men – mostly British born "Black and Tans" – to permanently leave Britain and Ireland.³⁴

The RIC Tribunal admitted that the pensions awarded to disbanded men were “in most cases insufficient in themselves to maintain the men and their families.”³⁵ There were also complaints in the House about the amounts awarded in separation allowances. Conservative MP Lieutenant-Colonel Martin Archer-Shee insisted that the “sum is totally inadequate. They all complain that they cannot possibly keep their wives and families on their pensions, plus only that amount of 3s. a day.”³⁶ Though Churchill disagreed, Sir William Davison also complained that it was inadequate for the maintenance of a family, particularly as the sum was the same “whatever the size of the family may be.”³⁷ Men who had retired before being disbanded were ineligible for disturbance allowances, separation allowances, and RIC Tribunal assistance, as in the case of Michael Egan, an ex-sergeant who fled Cork with his wife and three children in April 1922.³⁸ Into the gaps stepped private charities, usually led by the “die-hard” right of the Conservative Party. The Southern Irish Loyalist Defence Fund, chaired by Conservative MP Captain Charles Talbot Foxcroft, placed advertisements for suitable homes – “Moderate rent and reasonable distance from school” – for “Catholic members of the Royal Irish Constabulary with families.”³⁹ In July 1922, Foxcroft claimed that the fund had given “financial assistance to nearly 400 distressed Irish loyalists, besides helping a large number of R.I.C. refugees.”⁴⁰ By then it was due to merge with the newly formed Southern Irish Loyalists Relief Association (SILRA), which established its own RIC Relief Committee. SILRA claimed to have 4000 ex-RIC on its books in September 1922 and was continuing to seek out men who were “unaware of this source of assistance,” including those “in England whose families are still in Ireland.”⁴¹ The SILRA committee assisted men in finding accommodation in England and facilitated an “expedition” to bring wives over to join them.⁴²

In spite of the efforts, and claims, of the government and charities like SILRA, finding work for ex-RIC in Britain remained difficult.⁴³ British constabularies were not keen on men with RIC service, because of pension implications, the militarised nature of their service in Ireland, and the stigma attached to the violence of the “Black and Tans.”⁴⁴ Members of the “old RIC” had been well-regarded for their physical stature and discipline, but policing in Ireland in 1920 and 1921 was clearly deemed to have rendered them counter to the “idealised English policeman”: men capable of being physically dominant when necessary but men who had also won the respect of the public and exercised authority by maintaining control over themselves.⁴⁵ Ex-RIC who wished to continue policing outside of Ireland instead had to look to forces in the colonies. As Seán William Gannon has demonstrated, most who followed this route joined the new British section of the Palestine Gendarmerie, but married men were ineligible to join in 1922. For those who stayed in Britain, the dishonour associated with former police service in Ireland could extend to other employers.⁴⁶ When asked to use his influence to secure inspectorships for ex-officers with local authorities in London, the commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police, Sir William Horwood, replied that it was “doubtful whether he is in a position to render any assistance.”⁴⁷ Inability to secure additional income then meant delays in bringing wives and children to Britain. One ex-policeman, yet to recover from the wounds that forced him to retire, was unable to work in 1922 and was, as the RIC Tribunal found, “without sufficient funds to provide a house in this country [England] for his wife and child who it is urgently desirable to remove from Ireland.”⁴⁸ Patrick Wrynn even stayed put in Louth as he considered it “a waste of money to move my home unless I can do so to where I am likely to find employment, as my pension is not sufficient to support my family and

reside anywhere I must both find accommodation and employment."⁴⁹ Many of the ex-RIC who applied to the IGC in the late 1920s had remained sporadically employed or unemployed since 1922, living off pensions or creditors.⁵⁰ 265

Leaving Ireland was often equated with the disappearance of good job prospects or comfortable standards of living, especially for older men. Luke McMahon complained of being "Reduced to poor circumstances from a decent salary (£234 per annum) and allowances, to a pension of £138-6-4 per annum."⁵¹ Edward Tighe wrote of how "I have lost greatly by my expulsion as I intended to buy a grocery, spirit and provision business, and also to carry on a horse-dealing business, as I had been in the mounted force in the Constabulary. I could not return to Ireland as a man who was expelled and returns has no decent life and is the object of hate and ill-will."⁵² During a debate on the Constabulary (Ireland) bill, Chief Secretary for Ireland Sir Hamar Greenwood suggested that many ex-RIC were sons of farmers or farmers themselves and "looked forward to a return to their farming at the end of their careers in the police force. For many that is now impossible."⁵³ Archer-Shee argued that while the pensions for "younger members of the force who have only served a very short time" were "comparatively generous," married men with longer service – "many of whom have had a little farm in the country, and have got a comfortable home together" – "cannot turn out of their home, bring their wife, children, and furniture over to this country, and set up a home again for £32. That is not enough money to bring them over from the West of Ireland and set them up here."⁵⁴ 270 275 280

Moreover, the extent of hardship remained relative, and those from better backgrounds, with higher expectations, "suffered" in different ways. Divisional Commissioner Moore, one of six men specially promoted to newly created divisional commands in response to the conflict in Ireland, pointed out to the RIC Tribunal that on disbandment he and his colleagues were "losing our employment without any prospect of new employment and this at a period of our lives when our financial obligations are daily increasing."⁵⁵ The eldest of 50-year-old Moore's four children – all of whom remained in Ireland with their mother after Moore was forced to leave – was apprenticed to a solicitor in Ireland and, as the Tribunal reasoned, "would have to be separately maintained when family is moved to Great Britain. Three other children will have to be educated in Great Britain at greater cost than in Ireland."⁵⁶ Moore also insisted that his retiring allowance of £600 per annum (about £32,000 today) would mean that "I will have to either deny my children their education or my wife and myself will have to live in a hovel ... And this all happens at a time when at last I was in receipt of a salary, and which I anticipated ... would have enabled me to give my family the start in life suitable to my position."⁵⁷ In contrast, former constable Francis Ronan felt that "I must get work of some kind, or leave my family in want"; his yearly pension amounted to £94.5.0 (about £5300).⁵⁸ Martin McLaughlin believed it was "impossible to live in any fair way" on his £45.4.6 per annum.⁵⁹ 285 290 295 300

While the intricacies of personal relationships usually remain impervious to historical examination, forced separation was also likely to create or exacerbate problems in an individual marriage. Moreover, the hurried flight of one partner inevitably raised significant practical issues for a family. The disruption to mail and wire services, for instance, made it difficult to maintain contact between separated partners. In August 1922, the British *Morning Post* published a letter from a "disbanded member of the R.I.C. now in this country." The writer claimed to have been in Britain since April, while his wife and five children "remained in a town in the West of Ireland, which is currently held by Irregular [anti-Treaty IRA] forces": 305 310

I have not heard from her for three weeks, though I have sent several letters and wires. I do not know how she is being treated. She is probably without a house or food, and who knows but worse still might have happened. I dread to think of her lot, with five young children . . . It's awful to think of. . . . What agony of mind to know my wife and children are in the midst of foes without having a line from her.⁶⁰

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The correspondent was unnamed, but similar stories were repeated to the RIC Tribunal. One of the ex-policemen who went to Letchworth had left his wife in Sligo town and in July 1922 claimed that he could not get in touch by letter or wire, and had not heard from her for over two weeks.⁶¹ Another reported that he had been in Birmingham waiting over three weeks for contact. "Am in an awful plight," he wrote, "I do not know whether they are dead or alive. They have no money nor can I get any sent to them."⁶² After an ex-policeman fled the family home in Wexford, his wife made it clear that she had no desire to follow: "It would be a heartbreak on me to upset my home and little ones to go and live in another country." She instead begged Michael Collins to allow her husband leave to come home: "Will any good man in the Department for Godsake let me have him back? He is not an Englishman or a Black and Tan – he was a true born Irishman from Cork and I dont think he ever did any wrong to brother Irishmen."⁶³

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Communication may even have been deliberately avoided. While it is not clear how many cases occurred, or how many were British or Irish, it seems that a small minority were encouraged to either use the upheaval as an opportunity to escape from their marriages or took a decision to do so after they had been separated. In its final report, the RIC Tribunal suggested that, in future cases, "No married man should be allowed to proceed overseas unless his wife and family accompany him." Facilitating men to travel alone at the outset had given rise to "considerable difficulties such as the subsequent refusal of a wife to join her husband, causing in some cases his return to unemployment in this country [England], desertion by the husband, and even cases of bigamy."⁶⁴ The Home Office, whose policy was only to give out the personal details of RIC pensioners in Britain in restricted circumstances, also acknowledged that allowing husbands to emigrate without bringing wives and children had caused some long-standing issues where men had tried to evade their responsibilities. When a proposal to loosen the restrictions was considered in April 1931 it was noted that "in certain cases we have furnished the address of a husband, and in fact have brought certain pressure to bear." While it was deemed preferable to avoid implication in family disputes, it was also recognised that, having allowed men to emigrate without first taking their families, some "latitude" was necessary owing to "the trouble which frequently arose from the separations." Action was, however, only possible where men accused of abandoning families had applied to commute their pension and thus where there had been a financial interaction enabling separation. "No action," it was suggested, "could or would have been taken where a wife merely complained that her husband had left her."⁶⁵ One civil servant was encouraged to consider "whether, when the pledge was given not to disclose the whereabouts of an ex-R.I.C. man, it was anticipated that any would take advantage of it to evade their responsibilities towards their wives and families, and whether, by so abusing it, they had forfeited their right to further protection." Ultimately, however, no policy changes were agreed to.⁶⁶

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The ex-RIC are a particularly well documented cohort, but even still many lives remain undocumented or difficult to track into the 1930s. While it is the complaints and grievances that most often survive – and they do not necessarily always represent the

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majority – the struggles of Irish born ex-RIC, their families, and other so-called loyalist “refugees” are among the less savoury legacies of the early years of the Irish Free State.

Forced migration and gendered violence

Forced migration and separation in this period must be understood in the context of contemporary gender roles, the ways in which violence was understood, and the ways it was practised. Michael Flynn and his family were forced out of two homes in Ireland before travelling to Dover. A year later he wrote that “My wife got such a fright that she is not the same since.”⁶⁷ Flynn was not unusual in referring to permanent psychological – rather than physical – damage inflicted upon his wife. James Tarsony similarly described how his wife “got into a terrible state of fright & shock from which she never recovered” after he was taken from his home by armed men who fired over his head. She died in a mental institution in Wexford in 1927 and while the local doctor believed her “break-down” was unrelated to the events of 1922, their clergyman was at least willing to acknowledge that “members of the R.I.C. and their families must have suffered a lot of mental trouble as well as physical trouble” and the possibility that these two things might be “even remotely” connected.⁶⁸ While the IGC and RIC Tribunal only considered post-Truce losses, for police families the upheaval of disbandment had followed the traumas of two years of a police boycott, which, while not always effective, had often directly impacted on wives and children.⁶⁹

In another case, the local parish priest described the effect on the previously healthy Hanna Scollard in Waterford after her husband, a disbanded sergeant, had fled to England: she was “practically a nervous wreck . . . I saw her that morning lying on the bare floor of the house with her young children lying around her and I was not surprised to hear that she never fully recovered.” The Scollards were among the ex-RIC families who had settled in the “little colony” in Letchworth, but rather than brave stoicism the local doctor found “a complete wreck suffering from nervous breakdown.” The opinion of another doctor in 1927 was that “she is suffering from neurasthenia brought about by fear for herself and her family during her husband’s absence. Her condition was probably much worse formerly but I am of opinion that she will never completely recover from the shock sustained by her nervous system in the unsettled times in Ireland in 1921–22.”⁷⁰

Across the compensation claims submitted to the IGC, women are regularly depicted as the consequential victims of revolutionary violence practiced primarily against men. Women were also most likely to be described as suffering from “neurasthenia,” “fright,” “shock,” or “nervous breakdown.”⁷¹ In reference to his own wife, John George Donaghy wrote that “like most of the women who was in Ireland during the trouble she is a nerve shattered creature.”⁷² An attempt on the life of an RIC constable in April 1922 rendered his wife, in her own words, “a complete invalid suffering continuously from sleeplessness and unable to do housework or engage in any occupation.”⁷³ There are only a handful of confirmed cases of discriminate, fatal violence against women in this period but heavily pregnant Lily Blake was killed alongside her husband, a district inspector in the RIC, and two others during an ambush at Bullyturin House in Galway.⁷⁴ Police wives were also wounded in shooting attacks on their husbands in family homes in Galway and Mayo in early 1922.⁷⁵ The intimate nature of violence in revolutionary Ireland further meant that its impact went far beyond fatal (or attempted fatal) shooting.

Women, both loyalist and republican, were regularly subject to a range of other acts of threat and harm before and after the Truce.⁷⁶ In that context, the lone migration of a male partner raises questions about how the parameters of violence were understood, where danger was believed to lie, and how decisions were made in the face of real or perceived threat. 405

In a 1988 book, Denis Kennedy suggested that large numbers of loyalists crossed into Northern Ireland after 1920 but later returned home. Among shopkeepers and farmers for whom a permanent exit was difficult, Kennedy suggested that it was likely that “wives and children would be sent North, possibly to relatives or friends, while one or two family members remained at home to look after the farm or business.” But “where assassination was feared,” “menfolk would have travelled North, leaving the women to carry on until some degree of calm had returned.”⁷⁷ That a man threatened with shooting would leave home without his wife or children implies certain assumptions about the gendered boundaries in which violence took place. A memorandum on the Irish Distress Committee, founded by the British government in 1922, offers an implicit recognition of these boundaries: “I understand that where a *man* in Southern Ireland fears that his life is in danger, the Irish Distress Committee could give *him* assistance to enable *him* to leave Ireland” [author’s emphasis].⁷⁸ The IGC’s 1930 report included a section on how the committee’s terms of reference had treated cases of “shock,” hinting at a very similar understanding: 410 415 420

It would be ... unjust to exclude from the category of physical injuries the nervous breakdown of a woman who had been compelled to witness her husband’s murder, or insanity supervening on threats to shoot, whether after a so-called “trial” or not, or on the terrorism of persistently nightly raids.⁷⁹

If it is less certain that the description of the psychological damage caused by raids is assigned a gender, “nervous breakdown” is clearly – perhaps unconsciously – associated with the wife of a man falling victim to lethal violence. 425

This is not to say that women could not, or would not, fall victim to physical or sexual violence, or that families were necessarily oblivious to the potential. It is clear that many cases of physical and sexual violence against women went unspoken and unreported.⁸⁰ But Louise Ryan and Justin Dolan Stover have suggested that even in spite of a limited number of publicised cases, the fear of sexual violence was pervasive.⁸¹ The brutal rape of Eileen Biggs by anti-Treaty IRA members in Tipperary in June 1922 was reported in graphic detail in the press and referenced in parliament. The Biggs were Protestants with strong family connections to the British army.⁸² The widely publicised attack took place in the family home, towards the end of a period in 1922 when an influx of Irish loyalist “refugees” was being reported in England.⁸³ Other acts of threat or violence against women and families may also have been known within communities, particularly among small Protestant congregations and groups of police families. While Biggs’ husband was at home when she was attacked, the separation occasioned by forced migration left women additionally vulnerable, even if the extent to which this was recognised remains difficult to discern. 430 435 440

As men travelled abroad and searched for new lodgings and work, it fell to wives to sell up property and settle affairs. This could be made more difficult by hostility to police families and, perhaps, by opportunism within local communities. Public auctions were 445

boycotted or prevented from taking place, and land and property was often sold at a fraction of its value.⁸⁴ The RIC Tribunal paid grants to men who had secured accommodation in Britain “but had no money to furnish them,” where their wives had been forced to leave items of furniture behind or sell them at a loss.⁸⁵ Women were also left to bear the brunt of raids on the family home.⁸⁶ In many cases police families were explicitly threatened by the IRA and warned to leave. Even if this varied from place to place and person to person, there was often genuine fear that threats of violence might be carried through in practice.⁸⁷ James Moore claimed that the very night he left home a group of armed men came to the house looking for him. Finding he was not there, Moore’s family were “threatened and ill-treated and forced to remain out in a field for several nights.”⁸⁸ Three weeks after Gerald Scollard left Ireland the family home was raided by “six armed men” who told his wife to “leave the house forthwith and follow her husband.” When she promised that she intended to leave and had already sold some of the family’s furniture, the raiders left. “As a result of the shock of the attack upon her she lived in daily terror until she was able to join her husband in England in the following July. She suffered in consequence from shock and nervous breakdown and was under medical treatment continuously and has not yet recovered.”⁸⁹ It is possible that some RIC wives had remained in Ireland in the expectation that husbands would return when conditions improved, only for intimidation to render this unfeasible. James Hopkins, who left Limerick for England in May 1922, claimed that “My wife got two threatening letters after I left Ireland telling her they would burn herself and her children out of the house if she did not leave.” She followed her husband to Sheffield where the family remained six years later.⁹⁰

Men fearing republican violence who chose to leave home immediately and unaccompanied made a conscious, though clearly difficult, decision and did so having assessed the threats and risks around them. This was informed by local circumstances and by broader notions about the dynamics of communal violence. It appears that the most immediate threat was very often believed to lie against the man rather than his wife (or children). Fear of fatal shooting, moreover, usually reserved for men, may have trumped other concerns – if they existed at all. This overarching assumption about lethal violence, as risky as it might have been, informed the nature of unplanned migration for policemen, ex-policemen, and loyalists. The risk of violence in the short term also needed to be weighed against the potential for long-term under-employment or destitution abroad, as well as the rupture of leaving home.

The processes by which women were thus left alone in the family home warrant further analysis. An obvious point of comparison is with the mothers, sisters, and wives of IRA volunteers who went “on the run” or were imprisoned by the Crown. Often active in the national movement themselves, they were regularly victims of physical or psychological violence during raids by Crown forces. Invasion of the home while in nightdress was common, and could be accompanied by physical searches, assault, hair cropping, or rape.⁹¹ Separation from families was difficult for soldiers, whether conventional or guerrillas. Stover has described the anxiety of active republicans on the run or in prison while their families remained in danger, and the trauma of raids they were unable to prevent.⁹² Raids by police and military themselves might be interpreted, as Ryan has put it, as “an assault on Irish masculinity, undermining the ability of men to defend their homes or their families.”⁹³ Forced migration had the same effect and the ex-RIC who left home alone were subject to similar

traumas, having been forced to forfeit their right to protect wives and children in the short-term or having chosen to do so for the potential of longer-term security (not necessarily guaranteed).

Many other attacks on the person – including those perpetrated by republicans against their enemies or perceived enemies – were described in vague or sparse terms or went unrecorded at all. By 1922, disbanded policemen had become victims of the sort of violence that their force – if not necessarily they as individuals – had been practicing in 1920 and 1921. Unlike active republicans, they were fleeing their homes, and the country, and no longer enjoyed the protection and camaraderie of colleagues. If they had ever felt it at all, the ex-RIC had also been denied any sense of serving a worthy cause or carrying out a necessary duty. Moreover, being unable to protect or provide for families was a source of potential shame or embarrassment, not least as “the central importance of work to masculine identity” was by then well entrenched.⁹⁴

Ultimately, the decision to go or stay put was a personal one, dictated by individual circumstances, personal attitudes or character, and the nature or likelihood of violence in a locality.⁹⁵ Men thus interpreted what was required of them as husbands differently. For Patrick Wrynn, it was leaving Louth for a “strange locality” that he deemed unsafe.⁹⁶ Some felt unable to flee, even if they had wanted to. As the writer of a letter reproduced by the Irish Unionist Alliance in a propaganda pamphlet described it:

I should be heartily glad if I could clear out of the country to some place where law and order are respected, but it is out of the question in my case for many insuperable reasons. ... I cannot even get as far away as Dublin with an easy conscience, for, were I away for any time, I believe the house would probably be raided, and my wife is not in good health, and the result might be very serious.⁹⁷

For Francis Ronan it was badly timed illness for his wife and young child that restricted his mobility, rather than any explicit fear of personal violence. “We have no friends, so I could not leave them,” he told the RIC Tribunal.

Only for this illness I would of course have gone to England or elsewhere, in search of employment. ... If the country had been quiet; if I could move about freely, and if sickness had not entered my home, I would have expended the sum I received, and probably more, in search of employment.⁹⁸

James Tarsony spent a short period in Dublin after he was threatened at his home in Wexford in May 1922, before returning to look after his wife “on account of her mental condition.”⁹⁹ There were also those who simply felt they lacked the resources to leave. Martin McLoughlin argued that “The R.I.C. Officers who had a good pension, being afraid left the country. It was not my case, as I had no means to take me anywhere.”¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

As Conor Heffernan has recently pointed out, historians of the RIC have tended to overlook masculinity as a theme, while “studies of Irish masculinity have similarly neglected the R.I.C.”¹⁰¹ Police wives have also received little treatment in the growing body of important work on women in revolutionary Ireland, or in studies of gendered and sexual violence in this period.¹⁰² There is more to be written on both of these topics, and significant room for further study of the afterlives of the force and its

members. The RIC came out of the struggle for independence as emphatic losers. If heroism and bravery had meant one thing during the conflict with the IRA, it perhaps meant something different once they had put away their uniforms. If cowardice or moral failing might be detected among the men who abandoned their responsibilities, bravery is found in those did whatever they felt was necessary, whether that meant leaving alone or staying put. Similarly, a focus on the loyalists of southern Ireland – abandoned by their more militant Ulster colleagues and left as a politically dormant minority in the partitioned state – necessitates viewing notions masculinity from a very different perspective. It was, for those men, more about protection and safety, pragmatism and survival, than fighting or dying.

Notes

1. Hughes, *Defying the IRA?*, 192–4.
2. Heffernan, “Physical Culture,” 237–51; Beatty, *Masculinity and Power*, 67–9 for Garda Síochána; Bureau of Military History Witness Statement 353 (James McGuill); and Hughes, *Defying the IRA?*, 22–5.
3. McGaughey, *Ulster’s Men*, 19.
4. Farrell, *Arming the Protestants*, 18; Wilson, “McMahon Murders,” 97; and McGaughey, “Language of Sacrifice,” 306–7.
5. Tosh, “Masculinities in an Industrializing Society,” 331–3.
6. Heffernan, “Physical Culture,” 242.
7. Walsh to Assistant Under-Secretary and Secretary, RIC Tribunal, 22 April 1922 (TNA, HO 351/98).
8. Tudor to Greenwood, 5 April 1922 (TNA, HO 351/95).
9. *Constabulary Gazette*, 28 January 1922.
10. Quoted in Fedorowich, “Problems of Disbandment,” 94–6.
11. I am grateful to Dr Gannon for sharing these figures, which are part of an ongoing research project.
12. Memorandum by Secretary, IGC (TNA, CO 762/1).
13. *Daily Mail*, 11 December 1922.
14. For the RIC’s reputation see Heffernan, “Physical Culture,” 22.
15. See note 13 above.
16. *Royal Irish Constabulary: Revised Terms of Disbandment* [Cmd. 1673], H.C. 1922. Pensions (termed “compensation allowances”) were calculated to account for lost service.
17. Report of the RIC Tribunal to Secretary of State for Home Affairs, 24 February 1924 (TNA, CO 762/1). Over 600 men were required to refund disturbance allowances as they had “remained in Ireland and not removed their homes” (including a small number who went on to join an Garda Síochána) but a generous interpretation of the rules allowed a further “large proportion” who did not move to keep theirs.
18. The letters are found in TNA, HO 351/98.
19. *Royal Irish Constabulary: Revised Terms of Disbandment* [Cmd. 1673], H.C. 1922.
20. Hemming quoted in Fedorowich, “Problems of Disbandment,” 105.
21. Report of the RIC Tribunal to Secretary of State for Home Affairs, 24 February 1924 (TNA, CO 762/1); Odgers to Jamieson, 11 April 1927 (TNA: HO 45/13580); Brief summary of the work of the RIC Tribunal, 1928 (TNA, CO HO/45/13029); and IGC Report of Committee, November 1930 (TNA, CO 762/212).
22. *Royal Irish Constabulary: Revised Terms of Disbandment* [Cmd. 1673], H.C. 1922 and Odgers to Jamieson, 11 April 1927 (TNA, HO 45/13580).
23. IGC Report of Committee, November 1930 (TNA, CO 904/212) and Memo by Secretary, IGC (TNA, CO 762/1).

24. The IGC was ultimately satisfied with the “bona fides” of the majority of its claimants: IGC Report of Committee, November 1930 (TNA, CO 904/212). The RIC Tribunal claimed that cases in which the Tribunal was misled were “very few” (TNA, CO 762/1). 585
25. O’Hegarty to Curtis, 18 May 1922 in *First Interim Report of the Irish Distress Committee*, 1922.
26. House of Commons debate (hereafter HC), 10 May 1922, vol. 153, col. 2249. The Dublin correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* (1 April 1922) suggested that “most” of 8000 Irish members would “go to England and Scotland” but this was an overestimate.
27. Patrick McDonagh, Irish Grants Committee claim (hereafter “claim”) (TNA, CO 762/37/7); Timothy Murphy claim (TNA, CO 762/7/3); and Thomas Sullivan claim (TNA, CO 762/130/7). 590
28. For recent debate on the extent and nature of Protestant emigration and population decline, see Wood, “Protestant Population Decline”; Bury, *Buried Lives*, 13–33; Fitzpatrick, *Descendancy*, 159–180; Bielenberg, “Exodus”; and Keane, “Ethnic Cleansing?”
29. Luke Patrick McMahon claim (TNA, CO 762/60/3). 595
30. See, for examples, Gannon, “Very Cruel Cases,” 17–20.
31. Brief summary of the work of the RIC Tribunal, 1928 (TNA, CO HO/45/13029).
32. Anderson to Horwood, 5 April 1922 and Whiskard to Buckland, 8 May 1922 (TNA, MEPO 2/1814). 600
33. HC, 22 May 1922, vol. 154, col. 796–9.
34. Fedorowich, “Problems of Disbandment,” 105.
35. Brief summary of the work of the RIC Tribunal, 1928 (TNA, CO HO/45/13029). Chamberlain quoted in Fedorowich, “Problems of Disbandment,” 93.
36. HC, 10 May 1922, vol. 153, col. 2258. The separation allowance was 14s. per week for a man, 17s. 6d. per week for a head constable, and 28s. per week for an officer for a maximum of three months. 605
37. See note 33 above.
38. Brennan, “Compensating the Royal Irish Constabulary.”
39. *Observer*, 7 May 1922.
40. *Belfast News-Letter*, 5 July 1922. 610
41. *Belfast News-Letter*, 19 September 1922.
42. RIC Tribunal, arrangements with SILRA RIC Committee (TNA, HO/351/99).
43. SILRA regularly published appeals for, and on behalf of, ex-RIC men looking for employment. See, for example, *Morning Post*, 9 October 1922, 14 October 1922, 14 February 1924.
44. Horwood to Churchill, 25 January 1922 (TNA, HO 45/24754) and *Daily Mail*, 22 December 1922. 615
45. Klein, “Quiet and Determined Servants and Guardians,” 201.
46. Gannon, “Southern Irish Loyalists,” 160–2 and Gannon, *Irish Imperial Service*, 31–7, 40–3. Police forces in the dominions were also disinclined to take on ex-RIC: Fedorowich, “Problems of Disbandment,” 99–100. 620
47. Commandant, RIC Camp, Gormanston, to Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, 28 April 1922 and reply, 6 May 1922 (TNA, MEPO 2/1814).
48. RIC Tribunal memorandum, 9 June 1922 (TNA, HO 351/96).
49. Patrick Wrynn to RIC Tribunal, 22 August 1922 (TNA, HO 361/98).
50. This is confirmed by many ex-RIC applicants to the IGC when asked to account for their current circumstances on the application form. See, also, the case of Michael Flynn, who ultimately returned to Ireland but remained unable to find secure work (TNA, HO 144/22575). 625
51. See note 29 above.
52. Edward Tighe claim (TNA, CO 762/39/20). 630
53. HC, 10 May 1922, vol. 153, col. 2243.
54. *Ibid.*, col. 2257.
55. “Summary of evidence given by Divisional Commissioner Moore on behalf of the Divisional Commissioners to the Tribunal,” 1922 (TNA, HO 351/96).
56. Note on Divisional Commissioner Moore, 1922 (*Ibid.*). 635

57. "Summary of evidence given by Divisional Commissioner Moore on behalf of the Divisional Commissioners to the Tribunal," 1922 (TNA: HO 351/96). Modern values (2018) calculated using <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ppoweruk/>.
58. Francis Ronan to RIC Tribunal, 20 July 1922 (TNA, HO 351/98).
59. Martin McLaughlin claim (TNA, CO 762/23/2). 640
60. Reprinted in *Belfast News-Letter*, 25 August 1922.
61. J. McGoldrick to RIC Tribunal, 14 July 1922 (TNA, HO 351/98).
62. W. Connolly to RIC Tribunal, 15 July 1922 (TNA, HO 351/98).
63. Quoted in Brennan, "Compensating the Royal Irish Constabulary."
64. Brief summary of the work of the RIC Tribunal, 1928 (TNA, HO 45/13029). 645
65. Memorandum, 17 April 1931 (TNA, HO 144/22600).
66. Minutes on Memorandum, Apr. to May 1931 (TNA, HO 144/22600).
67. Michael Flynn to RIC Tribunal, 19 May 1923 (TNA, HO 144/22575).
68. James Tarsony claim (TNA, CO 762/164/9).
69. See Hughes, *Defying the IRA?*, 21–39. 650
70. Mr and Mrs Gerald Scollard claim (TNA, CO 762/37/5). Hanna Scollard's first name is not given in the file: see 1911 census return for Gerald and Hanna Scollard, Waterford (<http://census.nationalarchives.ie/>) (accessed May 4, 2020).
71. As well as examples cited above, see, for instance, William John Milliken claim (TNA, CO762/11/1) ["nervous system became unstrung"]; Pim Goodbody claim (TNA, CO 762/85/1) ["several shocks and frights"]; and Jonathan C. Darby claim (TNA, CO 762/11/1) ["health of applicant's wife gave way and she had a nervous breakdown"]. 655
72. John George Donaghy claim (TNA, CO 762/55/9).
73. Mary Butler claim (TNA, CO 762/106/11). Butler claimed she had already suffered a boycott while living alone at Knock, County Mayo as her husband awaited disbandment in Ballyhaunis. 660
74. *Irish Independent*, 17 May 1921. Lily Blake's first name is not given in the report. See death certificate (https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths_returns/deaths_1921/05094/4399008.pdf) (accessed May 1, 2020).
75. *Evening Echo*, 6 March 1922 and *Freeman's Journal*, 9 March 1922. 665
76. Conolly; Byrne; Clark IHS.
77. Kennedy, *Widening Gulf*, 128.
78. Memorandum by the Secretary, Overseas Settlement Office, 11 November 1922 (TNA, CO 739/13).
79. IGC Report of Committee, 1930 (TNA, CO 762/212). 670
80. Connolly, "Sexual Violence," 2–5.
81. Ryan, "Drunken Tans," 77, 90 and Stover, "Families," 66.
82. See Eileen M.W. Biggs claim (TNA, CO 762/4/8); File on Mrs Biggs, Tipperary (TNA, CO 739/15); Clark, *Everyday Violence*, 186–7; and Connolly, "Sexual Violence," 6–7.
83. *First Interim Report of the Irish Distress Committee*, 1922. 675
84. This is a regular complaint in compensation claims. See, also, Memorandum to the Cabinet, 1927 (TNA, CO 762/1/16).
85. Notice to disbanded members of the RIC, Sep. 1922 (TNA, HO 351/99).
86. See, for example, Timothy Doona claim (CO 762/60/20) and Patrick McDonagh claim (TNA, CO 762/37/7). 680
87. Hughes, *Defying the IRA?*, 80 and Gannon, *Irish Imperial Service*, 45.
88. James F. Moore claim (TNA, CO 762/65/24).
89. Mr and Mrs Gerald Scollard claim (TNA, CO 762/37/5).
90. James Hopkins claim (TNA, CO 762/102/9).
91. Coleman, "Violence against Women," 141–9 and Byrne, "Keeping Company with the Enemy," 2–7. 685
92. Stover, "Families," 59, 62–4, 66–8.
93. Ryan, "Drunken Tans," 80.
94. Tosh, "Masculinities in an Industrializing Society," 333.

95. For wider discussion of the range and nature of violence and its impact on behaviour, see Hughes, *Defying the IRA?* 690
96. See note 49 above.
97. "Anarchy in the West of Ireland," n.d. (PRONI, D989/C/1/39).
98. See note 58 above.
99. See note 68 above.
100. Martin McLoughlin claim (TNA, CO 762/23/2). 695
101. Heffernan, "Physical Culture," 241.
102. The focus of most work on women's participation in the Irish Revolution has been on labour, suffrage, or republican activists. Violence as experienced by police wives is not within the scope of the literature cited above. 700

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