

# The disbandment of the Irish Regiments of the British Army in 1922: Reasons, Consequences and Legacy.

## Introduction

On Monday morning the 12 June 1922, a ceremony took place in St. George's Hall at Windsor Castle at which His Majesty King George V received the Colours of five Irish infantry regiments of the British army who were disbanded on the day. This brief essay offers an insight into some of the salient reasons, consequences and legacy of that disbandment.

## Reasons, Consequences and Legacy

Article 8 of the treaty between Britain and Ireland signed on 6 December 1921 in London, marked the beginning of the end of the Irish infantry regiments of the British army recruited in the Irish Free State. Article 8 stated: <sup>1</sup>

With a view to securing the observance of the principle of international limitation of armaments, if the Government of the Irish Free State establishes and maintains a military defence force, the establishments thereof shall not exceed in size such proportion of the military establishments maintained in Great Britain as that which the population of Ireland bears to the population of Great Britain.

Lloyd George suggested that the Irish military force proposed in the Treaty should be limited to 40,000.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly during the Treaty negotiations, the British had assumed that their Irish regiments would be retained. Moreover they hoped that the new Irish administration would pay for them. According to one British proposal dated 20 July 1921. <sup>3</sup>

‘Great Britain hopes that Ireland in due course and of her own free will, will contribute in proportion to her wealth to the regular Naval, Military and Air forces of the Empire.’ And , ‘that voluntary recruitment for these forces will be permitted throughout Ireland, particularly for those famous Irish Regiments which have so long and so gallantly served His Majesty in all parts of the world.’

This proposal was totally rejected by the Irish side. Erskine Childers wrote a memorandum in reply to the British proposals which he believed if implemented, ‘would be to retain Ireland in complete strategical, and consequently in complete political, subjection to Britain.’

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<sup>1</sup> *Final Text of the Articles of Agreement for a Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland 6 December 1921.* No. 88 NAI DT 2002/5/1. (Dublin: The National Archives of Ireland).

<sup>2</sup> *Memorandum of a Meeting at Winston Churchill's House London on 31 October 1921.* No.60 NAI DE 2/304/1. (Dublin: The National Archives of Ireland).

<sup>3</sup> *Proposals of the British Government for an Irish Settlement. Letter from David Lloyd George to Eamon De Valera 20 July 1921.* No.16 UCDA P150/151. (Dublin: University College Dublin Archive).

He believed the Irish, 'should stand out against their (i.e. British) right to have any British forces on Irish soil...England should not be allowed recruiting stations on Irish soil.' The Irish should have the, 'full right of course to raise our own army.'<sup>4</sup> The formation of an Irish Military Defence Force would reinforce a sense of Irish independence.

The refusal by the Irish to allow British recruitment in Ireland coupled with the agreed creation of an Irish Defence Force could only result in the disbandment of the Irish regiments whose natural recruiting grounds were the counties of the Irish Free State.

Another factor which fed into the decision to disband these Irish regiments was financial savings to the British exchequer. The post-war British treasury attempted to ensure that defence budgets, 'were contracted to level commensurate with the return of peace.'<sup>5</sup> In August 1921, a committee of business men chaired by Sir Eric Geddes had been appointed by the British cabinet, 'to report on means of reducing supply services expenditure.'<sup>6</sup> The Geddes Committee stated that, 'the Army was 54,000 men in excess of requirements.'<sup>7</sup> Geddes suggested that:<sup>8</sup>

In the Army, a reduction of 50,000 officers and men could be made in the Estimates without in any way reducing the forces employed by the War Office on foreign service.... The Army Estimates should be reduced in 1922-23 from 75,197,800 to 55 million (Pounds) and more thereafter.

The savings made to the British Treasury by the closure of Irish regimental depots and disbandment of Irish regiments offered a ripe and easy target for Geddes. One leading British Army Service paper noted: 'It seems practically inevitable that the wholesale disbandment threatened by the forecasts of the Geddes report may have to be met by the disappearance from the Army List of the greater number of our historic Irish regiments.'<sup>9</sup>

At a Cabinet meeting in Downing Street on 27 January 1922, the Secretary of State for War, Sir Laming Worthington Evans, 'enquired if he might announce the disbandment of the Southern Irish Regiments. The Cabinet agreed that there was no objection to the disbandment of the Southern Irish Regiments being announced.' Recruitment had already stopped.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Memorandum by Erskine Childers on Irish Defence as Affected by British Proposals of 20 July 1921.* No.17 UCDA P150/1913. (Dublin: University College Dublin Archive).

<sup>5</sup> McDonald, Andrew, *The Geddes Committee and the Formulation of Public Expenditure Policy, 1921-1922*, *The Historical Journal* 32, no. 3 (September 1998).p.653.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*p.643.

<sup>7</sup> *Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, Held at 10 Downing Street, S.W., on Friday, 17th February 1922, at 5:30 P.M.* CAB 23/29/11. (London: The National Archives, 17 February 1922).p.3.

<sup>8</sup> Higgs, Henry, *The Geddes Reports and the Budget*, *The Economic Journal*.Published by Wiley on behalf of the Royal Economic Society 32, no. 126 (June 1922). Pp.255-256. See also *Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, Held at 10 Downing Street, S.W., on Friday, 17th February 1922, at 5:30 P.M.*Pp.3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Wylly, C B, *Neill's Blue Caps. Vol. 3. 1914-1922* (Cork: Schull Books, 1996). p.143.

<sup>10</sup> *Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, Held at 10 Downing Street, S.W., on Friday, January 27th, 1922, at 12:30 P.M.* CAB/23/29/5. (London: The National Archives, 27 January 1922).

In February 1922, Worthington Evans, announced in the House of Commons that the King had approved the disbandment of six Irish regiments.<sup>11</sup> As predicted, Army Order No. 78 dated 11 March 1922 titled 'Reduction of Establishment', listed the actual regiments and battalions to be disbanded.

It wasn't only Irish regiments that faced the axe in Army Order No 78. English battalions were chopped too.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the disbandment of the Irish regiments must be seen as part of a continuum of regimental disbandment's which took place right across the British Army in the years immediately after the ending of the First World War. Back in July 1921 for example, the Army Council disbanded some twenty-one battalions of the Territorial Force in Scotland and Oxfordshire.<sup>13</sup>

Although included in the original list of disbandments, the Royal Irish Fusiliers whose depot was in Armagh, was eventually saved from disbandment due to public demand and political lobbying from Sir James Craig who wrote to Sir Winston Churchill on 6 March 1922 pleading not to disband the regiment. Reminding Churchill that Ulster was still part of the United Kingdom. The loss of the Royal Irish Fusiliers was according to Craig considered to be a 'slur upon the people who will consider that they are being classed with the South and West who are only too delighted to get rid of their connection with Great Britain.'<sup>14</sup>

The former officer of the 6<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers, Stephen Gwynn whose address was Temple Hill in Terenure, wrote to Lord French on 14 June 1922 appealing to him as a fellow Irish man if there was a, 'possibility of saving the continuity of the Irish regiments, in a new phase.' Somewhat naively, Gwynn hoped that if the Imperial Government could delay the disbandment, the Free State government might be in a position to take them on and thus continue, 'the tradition which represents so great an element in the normal life of Ireland.' Gwynn believed that the disbanded regiments could be used by the Free State government to restore what he termed 'sanity' in Ireland. He noted; 'Somebody, as I hold, will have to bring back sanity with a big stick; but the stick and the wielder of the stick must be native products. I have the feeling that the Irish regiments might be the stick.' However three days later in a reply to Gwynn's letter, Lord Cavan noted that it was 'absolutely impossible to postpone the disbandment of these regiments.'<sup>15</sup>

Among the five Irish regiments eventually disbanded was The Royal Dublin Fusiliers. During the First World War some 13,406 men of Other Ranks and 827 Officers served with the regiment of which 4,858 men were killed or died of wounds.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Anthony, Kinsella, *The British Military Evacuation*, The Irish Sword XX, no. No.82 (Winter 1997).Pp.281-282.

<sup>12</sup> Wylly, C B.Pp.145-146.

<sup>13</sup> *Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, Held in Mr Chamberlain's Room, House of Commons Sw., on Friday, 28 October, 1921 at 12 Noon.* . CAB/23/27/9. (London: The National Archives, 28 October 1921).

<sup>14</sup> Craig, Sir James, *Letter from Sir James Craig to Sir Winston Churchill Regarding the Disbandment of the Royal Irish Fusiliers.* CAB/24/134/24. (London: The National Archives, 7 March 1922).

<sup>15</sup> Gwynn, Stephen, *Letter from Stephen Gwynn to Lord French Appealing for the Delay in the Disbandment of the Irish Regiments.* CAB/24/137/46. (London: The National Archives, 14 June 1922).

<sup>16</sup> *Medal Rolls British War and Victory Medals of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers - Other Ranks* WO 329/1709-1712. (London: The National Archives). See also *Medal Rolls British War and Victory Medal of Royal Dublin Fusiliers - Officers* WO 95 329/ 2259. (London: The National Archives). For death casualties see. Burke, Tom, *Whence Came the Royal Dublin Fusiliers?*, The Irish Sword XXIV, no. 98 Winter (2005).p.446.

The battalions of the regiment were made up of Irish men on average 70.4% Irish, aged between twenty-one and twenty-five whose social background was a reflection of the Irish society between the years 1914 to 1918.<sup>17</sup> The majority of Other Ranks came from the tenement inner Dublin streets between the canals in Dublin postal districts numbers one and eight.

On 1 October 1922, some 11,116 men born in Ireland were serving in the British Army of which served in the Infantry Regiments of the Line. Table 1 lists the number of men born in Ireland who served in the British Army between 1920 and 1922. The drop in Irish men serving in infantry regiments due to disbandment was 5,974, i.e. the difference between 1921 and 1922. It is interesting to note that there was more Irish men serving in the British Army in 1920 than there were in the year 1913 before the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914.

Table 1<sup>18</sup>  
The number of men born in Ireland who served  
in the British Army between 1920 and 1922.

Year	Born in Ireland	Infantry Regiments
1 October 1913	20,780	
1 October 1920	21,866	12,492
1 October 1921	19,253	11,489
1 October 1922	11,116	5,515

As noted, enlistments in Irish regiments had been suspended during December 1921.<sup>19</sup> Yet despite the War of Independence in Ireland, between 1918 to 1921, some 8,482 men enlisted into the five Irish regiments that were disbanded in June 1922. Some 1,613 men joined the Royal Dublin Fusiliers of which 532 enlisted in Dublin, 71.5% of whom were native Dubliners. Three of those recruits were boys from The Royal Hibernian Military School in the Phoenix Park aged fourteen. One child aged thirteen named Frederick Southam from Blackrock, Co. Dublin was accepted into the regiment on 11 May 1919. In contrast, one recruit was a forty-five year old Farm Labourer from Bagnalstown, Co. Carlow. Brothers enlisted into the post-war Dublins. For example, Peter and John Mahon aged eighteen and twenty-two respectively, both Labourers from No. 5 Temple Bar, Dublin. Alfred Hayes aged fourteen years and eleven months enlisted on 6 March 1918. His younger brother Meredith Hayes aged fourteen years and six days enlisted a month later on 1 May 1918. They both came from Rathmines. The last Irish man to enlist into the RDF was William Gaughan, a Farm Labourer aged twenty-four from Sligo who enlisted in Dublin on 13 December 1921. He served a little over six months and was discharged on 30 June 1922.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Burke, Tom.p447. The percentages of Irish men in the battalions varied in both battalion and time throughout the war.

<sup>18</sup>Secretary, *The General Annual Report of the British Army Year Ending 30 September 1920* (London: The War Office, HMSO, March 1922). See same reports for 1921,1922.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony, Kinsella.p.281.

<sup>20</sup> *Irish Soldiers Records*. <https://www.Nam.Ac.Uk/Soldiers-Records/>, The National Army Museum.London. Note the website of the National Army Museum states that 536 men enlisted in Dunlin. Two men were named three times in error, hence the figure of 532.

Table 2.<sup>21</sup>

The number of men who enlisted into the five Irish regiments recruited in the counties of the emerging Irish Free State between 1918 and 1922.

Regiment	Enlistment
The Connaught Rangers	1,921
The Leinster Regiment	1,713
The Royal Irish Regiment (18 <sup>th</sup> )	1,650
The Royal Munster Fusiliers	1,595
The Royal Dublin Fusiliers	1,613
Total	8,482

Referring to Figures 1 and 2, the address profiles of the War and post-War RDF recruits follow a similar pattern. The majority of War and post-War recruits came from Dublin Postal Districts eight and one, i.e. between the canals. However it seems the age group within which the highest post-War recruits came from were the fifteen to twenty year olds; the majority of whom, some 344 out of 532 or 65%, attested as Labourers.<sup>22</sup>

One interesting feature of this study revealed that the majority of the Dublin recruits, approximately 76% returned to Ireland after their service in the British Army, mostly to their Dublin home address. The question arises, if so many of those recruited to the Dublin Fusiliers between 1918-1922 returned to Ireland, was Ireland such an unwelcoming place for British ex-Servicemen after all as we have been lead to believe.<sup>23</sup>

The disbandment of the five Irish regiments had a negative impact on the economy of Ireland both locally and nationally. One estimate of the number of British service personnel in Ireland in October 1921 was 57,116.<sup>24</sup> Their withdrawal must have had a negative economic impact on town economies where they were barracked. The closure of the Dublin Fusiliers depot in Nass resulted in a loss of income for local retailers in food, goods and services. Perhaps with a knowledge of things to come, on 23 January 1922, the Commanding Officer of the Depot, Lieut.-Col K.C. Weldon, placed a notice in *The Irish Times* warning all local business who were owed money by the Dublins depot to claim their dues immediately stating that: ‘All outstanding claims against the Depot, Royal Dublin Fusiliers, Naas, must be presented on or before January 27<sup>th</sup> 1922, after which date no liabilities can be accepted.’<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> For discussion on this topic see, Leonard, Jane, *Getting Them at Last. The I.R.A and Ex-Servicemen. Revolution ? Ireland 1917-1923* (Dublin: Trinity History Workshop, 1990.).

<sup>24</sup> Anthony, Kinsella.p.276.

<sup>25</sup> Editor, *The Irish Times*. Miscellaneous Notice. 23 January 1922. p.1.

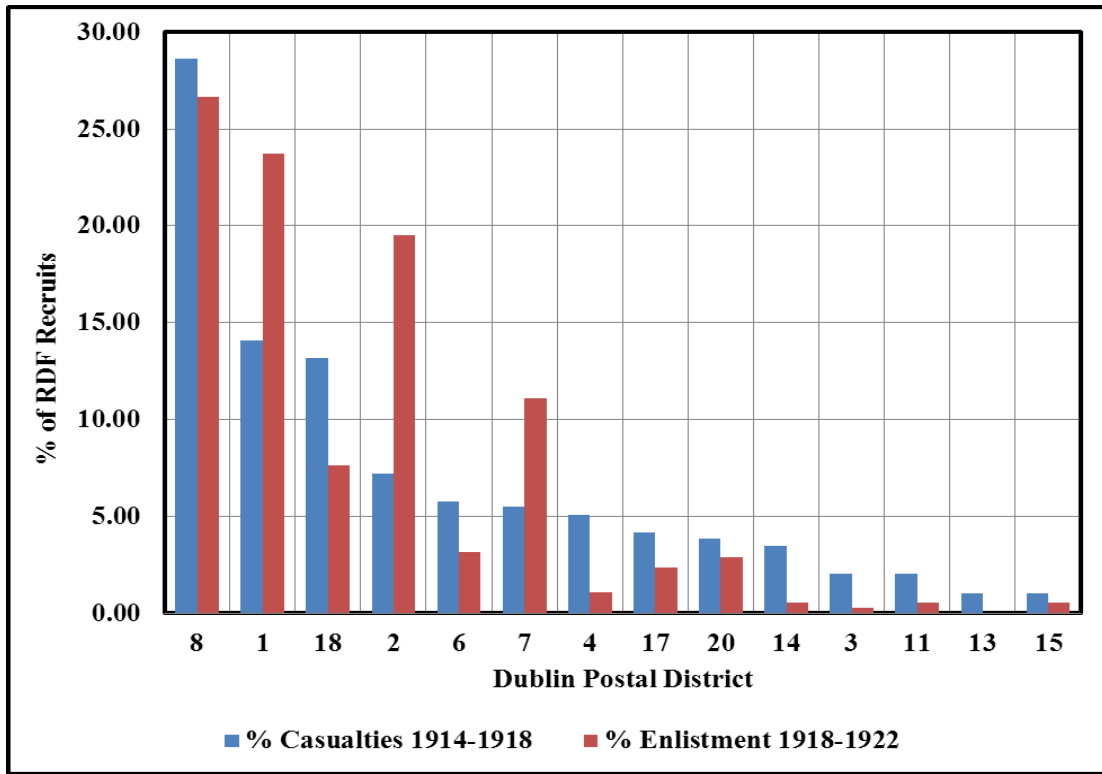


Fig. 1 Dublin district profile of WW1 and post-War RDF recruits.

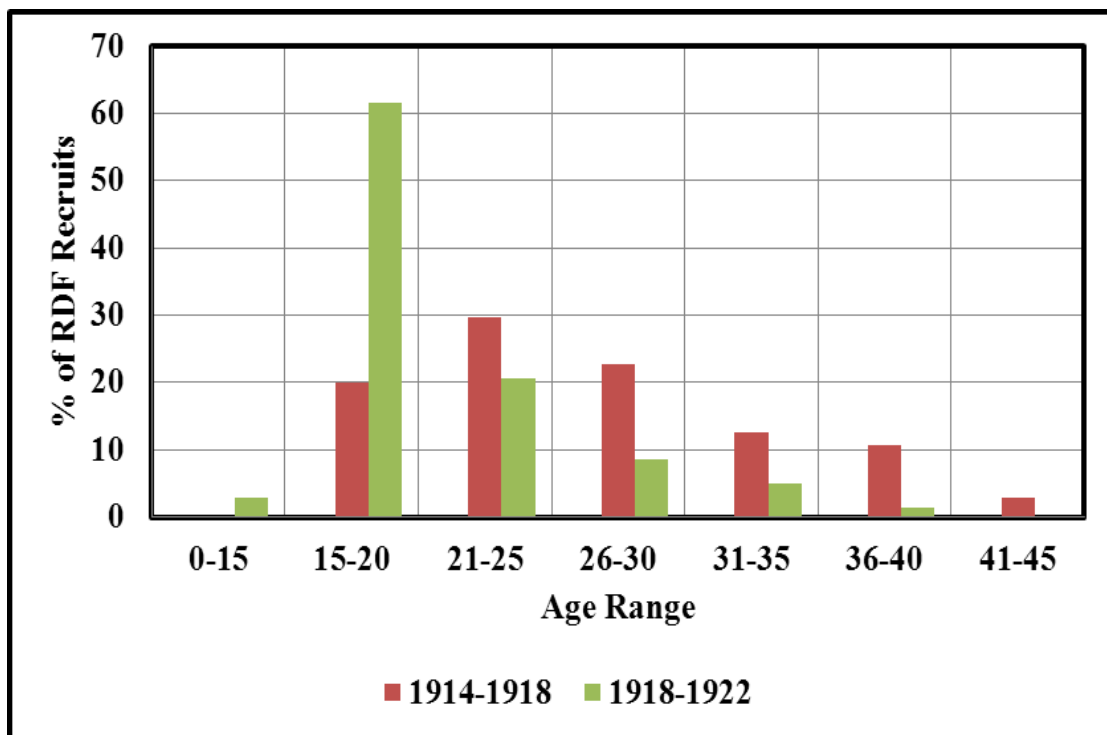


Fig 2. Age profile of WW1 and post-War RDF recruits.

At a national UK level, the cut backs proposed by Geddes of 20.00 million (Pounds) from the Army Defence Budget must have had a negative impact on Ireland as a consequence; perhaps in the order of millions removed from the Irish economy.

A typical example of the financial losses to Ireland following the disbandment of the five Irish regiments and withdrawal of the British Army from Ireland can be seen in the loss of revenue to the Irish economy of the money spent in Ireland by the British Army in the Irish Staff Command Account. Table 3 sets out the spending on that account between 1920 and 1924. Between those years, spending by the British Army on their Irish Command Account fell from Sterling 439,664 in 1920 / 1921, to Sterling 38, 756 in 1923 /1924. This was a loss of money to the fledgling Irish economy of Sterling 400,908. The increase on the 1921 / 1922 over the previous year is due to the costs incurred by the necessity of additional officers attached to the Irish Command from other units needed during the War of Independence.<sup>26</sup>

Table 3  
Spending by the British Army on Irish Command Account for years 1920 to 1924

Financial Year	Spending Pounds Sterling
1920 / 1921	439,664
1921 / 1922	513,843
1922 /1923	208,142
1923 /1924	38,756

There were further financial loses to the Irish economy, particularly in the building and construction business. For example, in the British Army Accounts for 1921 / 1922, expenditure on buildings and accommodation in barracks such as at the Curragh where, ‘Quarters for Married Officers’ were built at a cost of Sterling 20,894 and sewage works at the Curragh at a cost of Sterling 5,208. Or at Moore Park where, ‘Quarters for Married N.C.O.’s and men’, were built costing Sterling 13,567. The cost for ‘Accommodation for Temporary Garrison’ i.e. the accommodation of the extra soldiers required in Ireland during the War of Independence which had to be built, cost Sterling 373,724 up to 31 March 1922.<sup>27</sup> All of these projects used local suppliers of labour and material. Therefore, when disbandment and withdrawal of troops came about, there was no further investment in such projects resulting in a loss of income to the Irish companies who would have carried out similar projects in the future.

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<sup>26</sup> Harris, C, *Army Accounts: 1921-1922* (London: The House of Commons, HMSO, 13 March 1923). Pp.116-117. See also Ramsay, Malcom G *Army Accounts 1923 -1924* (London: The House of Commons, HMSO, 9 April 1925). Pp.114-115. Note. The Irish Command Account accounted for spending on items such as salaries for officers, civilians working for army, rents, rates, repairs, light, water etc. to army buildings,

<sup>27</sup> Harris, C.Pp.126-127.

Coupled with this loss of income to the Irish economy from the withdrawal of the British Army, the disbandment also closed a door to potential employment and income to a cohort of young Dubliners aged between fifteen and twenty, some even younger like the Hayes brothers, who lived in some of the poorest areas of Dublin city as shown in Figures 1 and 2 above, and, who could offer nothing more in terms of employment skills but their bodies as Labourers. The closing of the door into the ranks of the Dublin Fusiliers for these young men in 1922 would open another door into the ranks of McAlpine's Fusiliers years later.

To compensate men for the disbandment, which to most serving Fusiliers was disappointing, Army Order No.179 published on 11 May 1922 set out a series of instructions and offers as a form of redundancy package for serving soldiers about to be unemployed as a result of regimental disbandment.

Officers could retire with compensation, or, continue with their military careers and transfer to other regiments. Other than Lieut.-Colonels C.N. Perreau and G.S. Higginson, all the officers serving in both battalions of the regiment transferred to other regiments and corps within the Army. This amounted to some seventy officers.<sup>28</sup>

For the men of Other Ranks, a number of offers were also made such as the granting of twenty-eight days leave with full pay and allowances, transfer to another corps in the Army where required.<sup>29</sup> However the disbandment led to many men losing their job.<sup>30</sup> The need for assistance triggered the re-energising of The Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association who had an office in No. 77 Grosvenor Square, Rathmines. Formed in 1910, the objective of the Association was the welfare and wellbeing of ex-members of the regiment. Following a meeting of past and serving officers of the regiment in London on 9 March 1922, it was noted.<sup>31</sup>

It is expected that in the near future applications for assistance will be much increased owing to so many men, now in military employment in Ireland, losing their employment as a result of the withdrawal of troops from the country.

I would argue that with so many British ex-servicemen's welfare societies in Ireland in the years after disbandment such as The Royal British Legion, S.S.F.A, and regimental associations such as The Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association along with the St. Vincent de Paul and others, the average British ex-serviceman in the Irish Free State had more nets to catch him if he fell on hard times than the average Irish citizen who fell with him.

A little less than two weeks after Lieut.-Col Weldon's letter appeared in The Irish Times, the Dublins left the Depot in Naas for the last time. They arrived at Bordon Camp in Hampshire on 8 February 1922.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Wylly, C B.Pp.212-214.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p.148.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.148.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.p.235.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p.144.



A battalion of The Leicestershire Regiment took their place in Naas. In a petty act of defiance on the day the Leicesters left the barracks at Naas, which was Tuesday 16 May 1922, they cut down the flagstaff in the barracks. Because of this act, the barracks was taken over without ceremony by Free State Army officers under the command of Commandant Moylan.<sup>33</sup>

The *Freemans Journal* noted that the barracks was taken over by, ‘about 30 IRA men, principally drawn from Celbridge who marched from the police barracks.’<sup>34</sup> The same flagstaff cutting down act was performed at the handover of British to Irish troops in Victoria / Collins Barracks Cork on 18 May 1922. Referring to the flagstaff on which the Union Jack was flown, a disgruntled British officer was reported as saying. ‘That flag was flown for many a true soldier and it is unbecoming to fly a rebel flag.’<sup>35</sup>

After 250 years’ service to the British crown, the disbandment of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and the four other Irish infantry regiments of the line took place at a ceremony in St. George’s Hall at Windsor Castle on the morning of Monday 12 June 1922.<sup>36</sup> The Colours of the regiments were handed to the King for safe keeping by Colour parties from each regiment comprising of the regiments last commanding officer, colonel-in-chief and colonels.

Escort to the Dublin’s colour were Sergeants Doyle and Connolly. In his farewell speech, the King stated that the reasons for the disbandment were, ‘beyond your control and resistance.’ Specifically addressing the Dublin Fusiliers he stated. ‘Your history is the history of early British dominance in India and you have shown abundantly that you could fight as sternly in South Africa and in Europe as in the East Indies.’<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the King had not yet come to realise that the world had changed since 1918 and the days of Empire and British dominance were coming to an end, ironically symbolised by what was happening in front of him with the disbandment of his five Irish regiments. The Dublin Fusiliers trace their origins to the British East India Company. Twenty-five years after their disbandment, India too metaphorically disbanded itself from the Crown.

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<sup>33</sup> Editor, The, *Naas Military Barracks Evacuated*, *The Leinster Leader*.p.12.

<sup>34</sup> Editor, The, *Provincial News in Brief - Leinster*, *The Freeman's Journal*.p.2.

<sup>35</sup> Harvey, D and White, G, *The Barracks a History of Victoria / Collins Barracks, Cork* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1997).p.97.

<sup>36</sup> Wylly, C B.p.149. Note. The Regimental and Royal Colours of the disbanded Irish regiments are still on public display in St, George’s Chapel at Windsor Castle.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.Pp.149-152.

In an effort to establish its own identity and tradition, unlike other post-colonial armies such as the Canadians, ANZACs and indeed the Indian and Pakistan armies, the Irish Defence Forces discarded almost all regimental trappings and traditions associated with the old Irish regiments of the British Army. Ironically such traditions were strongly held on to by the regiments recruited in Northern Ireland such as the Royal Ulster Rifles, the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and the Royal Irish Fusiliers, all of which were not disbanded but amalgamated and whose Irish traditions and legacy is represented through the present day Royal Irish Regiment.

In conclusion it wasn't German, Turkish, Bulgarian or even Irish Volunteer bullets that brought about the end of the Irish regiments of the British army in 1922. Ultimately it was through the democratic wishes of a majority of the Irish people represented by the new political reality on the island of Ireland. It was carried out by a British administration, which, despite all the emotional rhetoric from the King and others, was probably glad to see the back of them for financial and political reasons.

Tom Burke  
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