

John Daly and Na Fianna Eireann in Limerick 1912-16

In 2009 the oldest branch in the Republican Movement celebrated one hundred years of service in the pursuit of Irish Freedom. Na Fianna Eireann was established on 16 August 1909 at a meeting held at 34, Lower Camden Street, Dublin. Constance Markievicz decided, after reading in the Irish daily newspapers that the King of England, as part of his Royal visit, had reviewed eight hundred young Irish boys of the Baden-Powell Boy Scouts and Boys Brigade, that it was time to act. She realised that Ireland was being attacked at her most vulnerable point, the hearts and minds of the nation's children. She feared that many of them would join the British Army, thus helping to keep Ireland un-free and part of the British Empire.

Markievicz placed an advertisement in the republican paper *An Claidheamh Solais* calling a meeting for like minded people, to set up a group to counter the pro-British Baden-Powell movement. The meeting chaired by Bulmer Hobson was held on 16 August 1909 and was attended by over one hundred boys and it was agreed to set up an Irish Boy Scout organisation and on a proposal from Hobson it was agreed to call it Na Fianna Eireann.

Con Colbert, a young man from Athea, County Limerick, who was working in

by Des Long

Dublin at that time, joined Na Fianna on that evening and quickly rose to the rank of captain.

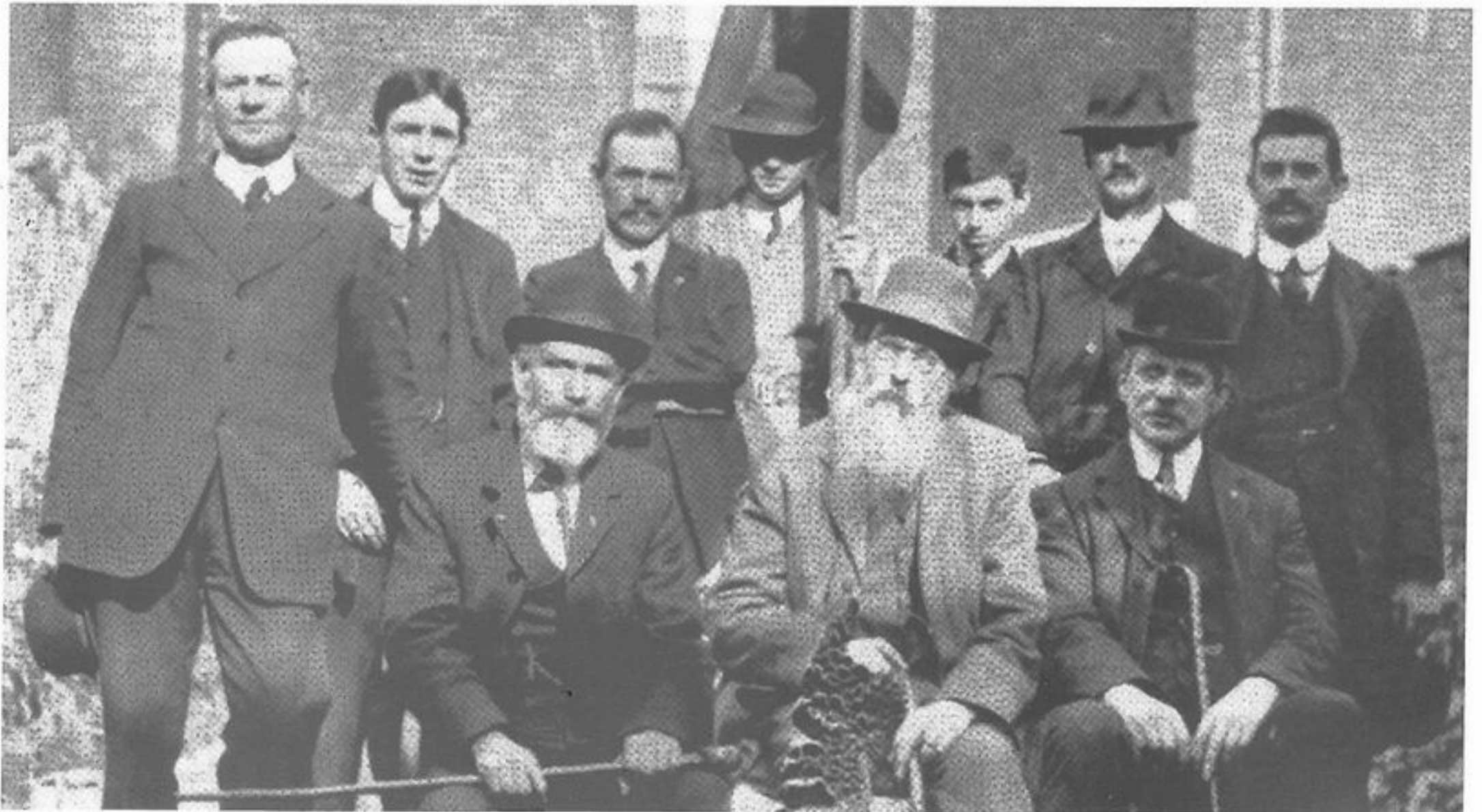
The danger posed to the British interests in Ireland was quickly recognised by the RIC and Na Fianna was constantly mentioned by the RIC Inspector General in his monthly reports to Dublin Castle. In his report in December 1911 he stated: 'The Irish National Boy Scouts is making its appearance in some places. Eight branches with 380 members are reported to exist. The object of this organisation is to train Irish boys to work for the independence of Ireland and to obey superior officers, never join England's armed forces, and to work for the independence of Ireland'.¹

Na Fianna Eireann had no branch in Limerick until 1912, due to the ill health of John Daly, the most influential Republican in Limerick. In an effort to improve his health Daly spent a lot of time in France in 1909 and 1910. He was losing the use of his legs and had to go about in an invalid chair, even in his house.

John Daly was born in Limerick in 1845 and worked as a sawyer in a City Saw Mill. He and his brother Edward became

members of the Fenian Brotherhood and at the age of 22 John was in charge of the movement in Limerick. The two brothers participated in the attack on Kilmallock Barracks, during which three Fenians died, and many were arrested afterwards, but John or his brother were not amongst them. In 1873 John became a fulltime Fenian organiser. In April 1883 he was arrested in Liverpool and charged with possession of explosives that were in a parcel given to him by an informer and he was not aware of what the parcel contained. Despite this fact he and another Limerick man James Egan were found guilty of leading a dynamite plot against the Crown and were both given life sentences. Daly was imprisoned in Portland Prison and it was there he met another Fenian prisoner Tom Clarke. This was the start of a lifelong association and friendship.

In 1889 a police commissioner made a deathbed confession that Daly had been framed. Despite this he was not released because the British Government considered him to be too dangerous to their interests. The IRB began to campaign for his release and had to organise a vigorous crusade in order to overcome the considerable opposition of the then Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick Dr. Edward Thomas O'Dwyer. As part of the campaign Daly



Group at rear of Fianna Hall, Barrington Street, Limerick. c.1913. Back L to R: Joe Halpin, Joe Dalton, — —, Con Colbert, Sean Heuston, Jack Dalton, Ned Fitzgibbon. Front L-R; Patrick Whelan (Snr), John Daly, James Leddin



Iconic picture of the three men who controlled the IRB in the early years of the 20th century. L to R: John Daly, Thomas Clarke and Sean McDermott

was proposed as a candidate in the general election of 1895. He was successful and was elected MP for Limerick, but the result was immediately overturned because John Daly was a political prisoner.

Daly was subjected to inhumane and cruel treatment while in jail. On at least one occasion the prison authorities tried to poison him with arsenic. This treatment forced John Daly to go on hunger strike. A court of inquiry into the attempted poisoning found in favour of Daly and against the prison authorities. In view of this and the massive campaign for his release the British Government was forced to free him. As a result of the ill treatment, attempted poisoning and terrible conditions he endured, the man released from prison in August 1896 was a pale shadow of the man incarcerated in 1884. While his body may have been injured and weakened the fighting spirit was still as strong, if not stronger than ever and he was to prove this over the remaining twenty years of his life.

On his release he undertook a lecture tour of America and after his return home he set up Daly's Bakery which traded

successfully in Sarsfield Street, Limerick until the 1970's. He also took on the responsibility of rearing the family of his brother Edward who died in 1891. One month after Edward's death a son also named Edward, was born to him.

John Daly became a member of Limerick Corporation and was elected Mayor on three occasions between 1899 and 1902. When Tom Clarke and James Egan were eventually released from prison John Daly arranged to have both of them granted the Freedom of Limerick City. After his release in 1898 Tom Clarke, usually accompanied by Seán MacDiarmada, regularly visited Daly in Limerick. These visits were central to the revitalisation of the IRB and the planning of future revolution in Ireland. The three continued to embroil themselves in the cause of Irish nationalism. When Na Fianna was founded in 1909 Daly saw this as a very important development and pledged to assist it in every way.

On Wednesday 7 February 1912 the members of the Wolfe Tone Club, which was a cover name for the IRB, called a meeting to establish a branch of Na Fianna

in Limerick. There were twenty five boys present and the Lord Edward Sluagh was founded. Joseph Dalton who was a member of the IRB and proprietor of City Printing Works was appointed the commanding officer of this unit.

By December 1912 the Limerick Sluagh was the largest in the country, which was due to the hard work and organisation put in by all the officers. Seán Heuston had been appointed Officer Commanding by then. He was a methodical leader who planned every detail of the year's programmes well in advance. He knew that success depended on keeping the boys fully occupied and interested. Joseph Dalton, who was in charge of physical education, as he had been a champion boxer and trainer. Fr. Hackett taught history and Sean himself took charge of drill, signalling and general scouting.

On 8 December 1912 Na Fianna paraded in Barrington Street and two hundred scouts greeted John Daly on his arrival at the parade ground. Daly presented the new Sluagh flag to the City Fianna and as he raised it said "I raise this flag in the name of Fianna Eireann and in the name of Ireland." While he raised the flag, pipes played 'A Nation once again'.

Later that month Na Fianna became the proud owners of a magnificent hall and drill yard. The total cost of erecting the hall was borne by John Daly and it was erected on a site at the back of Daly's house in Barrington Street. This hall was officially opened on Friday 13 December 1912 at a ceremony chaired by John Daly. Amongst the large attendance were two hundred and fifty members of the Limerick Fianna Eireann and many invited guests, including Bulmer Hobson who delivered the inaugural lecture on 'The Irish Nation'.

Tom Clarke wrote to Daly in December complimenting him on the great headway Na Fianna was making in Limerick. He wrote: 'It's grand to find that you made this Fianna such a success in Limerick. You are ahead of anything in Ireland. In Dublin they haven't yet got the length of thinking about building a hall'.²

This hall became very important for Republican Limerick over the coming years. Many important meetings and lectures were held within its walls, as well as being used for its primary purpose of scouting. Many of those who lectured in the hall went on to play important roles in the coming War of Independence. Seán Mac Diarmada during which he repeated the advice to young men not to join the British Army delivered one of the more memorable lectures.³

By early 1913 Na Fianna had its own pipe band, which was called the 'Brian Boru Pipe Band'. In spring that year Na Fianna held a big route march and over two hundred scouts, most in uniform, took part in the exercise. The pipe band led the parade with Roger Casement, Ned Daly, Seán Heuston and other Fianna officers at the head of the march. Soon after the route march Seán Heuston was transferred to Dublin where he joined the Robert Emmet Sluagh. Limerick's loss was to be Dublin's

gain and on his departure Joseph Dalton was once again appointed O/C.

Despite the departure of Seán Heuston Na Fianna continued to expand and train the young boys of Limerick. The steady progress of Na Fianna in Limerick was a cause of serious concern for the RIC on a national basis. This is reflected in the reports to Dublin Castle from D I Yates and Inspector General Chamberlin over the next number of years. The reports give a clear indication of their concerns. In February 1913 they reported: 'The Irish National Boy Scouts is making no headway. The only strong branch is at Limerick of which ex-Fenian convict John Daly is president.'⁴ In July that year a report states: 'The Limerick branch which is under the guidance of ex-convict John Daly, and is apparently the most active branch in existence.'⁵ The RIC reports pointed out that the Roman Catholic Clergy was hostile to Na Fianna and the movement was discouraged by them'.⁶

In 1914 the Limerick Battalion held its AGM and was attended by over one hundred and forty members. Seamus Leddin, president of the Wolfe Tone Club (IRB) congratulated all on the progress over the year. In his report the secretary said the departure of Seán Heuston was the greatest loss the area had suffered. He recalled the tragic death of Finn William Davern who gave his life in an attempt to save a companion from drowning in 1914 and after placing his name on the Fianna Roll of Honour the AGM concluded with the members singing 'A Nation once again'. The treasurer reported that the Sluagh had £120 on hands.

In 1914 Joseph Dalton was forced to re-organise the City Fianna. In Limerick and in every other branch in the country all the officers' energies were divided between Na Fianna and the Volunteers, which had been founded on 25 November 1913 at a meeting in the Rotunda, Dublin and it quickly spread nationwide. The Volunteers were founded in Limerick on 25 January 1914. As a result Na Fianna lost nearly two thirds of its officer core to the Volunteers, as they were much in demand for their skill in drill and military craft training.

By 1915, as Na Fianna had expanded more in Munster than any other part of the country, it was decided to hold a convention for that area. The task of organising the event fell to James Dalton Limerick O/C. It was decided to hold it in Limerick on Whit Monday. As things turned out, that weekend proved to be a hectic one for Na Fianna and the Volunteers. Seán Heuston had also organised a camp for the Dublin Fianna to take place in Limerick at the same time. The Volunteers had also organised a national parade for Limerick on the same weekend. Two trains from Dublin carrying Volunteers and Na Fianna arrived at Limerick on Sunday. There was also a train from Cork together with many buses from other areas.

The Fianna lined up in the station yard where they were inspected by the recently appointed Fianna National Organiser, Finn Liam Mellows and Captain Robert Mon-

teith. Both of these men had been deported from Dublin by orders of the British authorities. In the afternoon the Volunteers and Na Fianna paraded through the city. All went well until they reached the Mungret Street area where they were met with a barrage of missiles and abuse. This onslaught became so bad that the marchers were forced to defend themselves with their rifles butts. The reason for the attacks lay in the fact that the marchers were in the poorer parts of the city where a lot of the wives and families of those serving with the British Army in Europe lived. The attacks lasted most of the afternoon and well into the evening.

Madge Daly blamed an element, which for their own political ends feared the Volunteer movement. In her unpublished autobiography she wrote: 'A member of the Hibernians had come down from Dublin some days before the attacks. He left money for Porter in all the pubs in the poorer quarters of the town where the separation families lived'.⁷

On Whit Monday the Munster Convention was held under the chairmanship of Col. James Leddin, President of the Limerick Sluagh. The delegates in attendance were from Limerick city, Foynes, Ballylanders, Cork, Fermoy, Cobh, Tipperary and Clonmel with apologies sent from Tralee, Waterford and Thurles. There was a large attendance, which included a number of Fianna Headquarter Officers, Volunteers and members of Cumann na mBan. A number of motions were debated and passed. The following motion from Limerick was also debated. 'That with the view of furthering the progress of Na Fianna Eireann in Munster a provincial council should be formed. That this convention be summoned as soon as possible to meet in Cork, consisting of one delegate from each Munster Sluagh, to elect this council and consider ways and means for organising the Province.' After a lengthy debate this motion was agreed, and the convention was later held in Cork.

The Limerick Fianna continued to recruit and train in anticipation of helping to strike another blow in the fight for freedom. The new Fianna Eireann handbook published in 1914 assisted them in the training. This manual had chapters on drill, rifle exercises, various aspects of military training and first aid.

The fact that the Limerick Volunteers took no active part in the 1916 Easter Rising had a demoralising effect on Na Fianna Eireann in Limerick. The subsequent failure of the Rising in Dublin and the executions, which were to follow, was a very bitter disappointment to the Limerick Sluagh. The executions of three men who were at one time part of the Limerick Sluagh, was a devastating blow to all concerned. The executions of Limerick Fianna members, Seán Heuston one time O/C, Ned Daly nephew of its president John Daly and Con Colbert was indeed a very heavy burden. The loss also of two other friends and comrades of the city Sluagh Tom Clarke and Seán MacDiarmada also hit them badly.

After the Rising John Daly heard that the Volunteers intended to surrender their weapons to the British. He demanded that Jim Leddin return the Howth rifle and two other miniature rifles that he gave the Volunteers before the Rising, as he did not want them surrendered to the British Forces. On the return of the weapons Daly carried the Howth rifle about the house in his wheelchair and at night it was placed beside his bed. He had resolved that the Crown Forces would only get it over his dead body. There is no record of any Fianna Eireann weapons being surrendered to the British.

The Crown Forces raided John Daly's home at 5 am on 11 May 1916 and the raid lasted for five hours. At the time Daly's health was so bad that he was confined to his bed and had a nurse in constant attendance. Madge Daly recalled: 'When the raid started I went to my uncle's room, and hid his revolver and small automatic in his bed. The Howth rifle was also hidden and it too was not found. It is now in the 1916 section of the Museum in Dublin'.⁸ On 30 June 1916, John Daly ex Fenian Prisoner, elected MP for Limerick, three times Mayor of Limerick, organising member of the IRB and founding member of Na Fianna Eireann in Limerick died. The animosity felt, by the British, towards John Daly can be gauged from what Madge Daly wrote: 'My uncle had a public funeral. The largest it is said ever seen in Limerick. All the men who attended it, who were employed in the post office or similar jobs were called before the authorities and threatened with dismissal'.⁹

In a speech made by Pádraig Pearse in 1914, he paid the following tribute: 'We believe that Na Fianna Eireann had kept the military spirit in Ireland during the last number of years and if the Fianna had not been founded in 1909 the Volunteers would not have arisen'.¹⁰

After the failed Easter Rising, the executions and the death of their founder, the Limerick Fianna Eireann was to reorganise and continue on the same revolutionary path laid for them by one of the greatest, if not the greatest ever Limerick patriot, John Daly.

SOURCES

- 1 RIC Inspectors Reports to Dublin Castle. Files in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.
- 2 Madge Daly, *Unpublished Autobiography*, Special Collections Library, UL, Chapter 15 p. 3.
- 3 Gerard MacAtasney. *Seán MacDiarmada*. (Manorhamilton 2004) p. 60.
- 4 *RIC Inspector General's Report to Dublin Castle*. File in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.
- 5 *Ibid*.
- 6 *Ibid*.
- 7 Madge Daly, *Unpublished Autobiography*, Special Collections Library, UL, p. 87.
- 8 *Ibid* p. 150.
- 9 *Ibid* pp 153/154.
- 10 Patrick J. McGlynn. *An Cumann Cabhrach Brochure*. (Dublin 1984).