Preparing for Rebellion
An overview of the gun-running events in 1914

by Tom Toomey

The importation of arms by the Irish Volunteers, in the summer of 1914, had its roots in the passing of the 3rd Home Rule Bill in January 1913. Ever since the rise of Charles Stewart Parnell the Irish Parliamentary Party had established as their primary goal, the attainment of Home Rule. On two previous occasions, in 1886 and again in 1893 the party had come extremely close to attaining this objective. In 1886 it failed because a sufficient number of Liberal Party MPs switched sides and helped to defeat the bill by 343 votes to 311. In 1893 the 2nd Home Rule Bill was actually passed in the House of Commons by a majority of 40 votes but it was defeated in the House of Lords by the unelected peers of the realm by 419 votes to 41. Irish Home Rule was only an issue for the British Parliament when the arithmetic dictated that the British Liberal Party required the support of the Irish Parliamentary Party to hold government office. William Gladstone was the only leader of the British Liberal Party who treated Home Rule for Ireland as a matter of policy rather than political expediency. However, before any Bill giving Home Rule to Ireland could be successfully enacted, the power of veto, held by the House of Lords, had to be tackled. It was also very important that this veto should be tackled on an issue other than Irish Home Rule.

This opportunity was presented to Herbert Asquith, the new leader of the Liberal Party, when the House of Lords refused to pass his budget in 1910. Asquith immediately called a General Election, in December 1910, and he was returned to power with the help of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Asquith immediately introduced a bill which would limit the power of the House of Lords in that they could only delay the passage of a bill for two years. The alternative offered to the Lords was that Asquith would appoint as many new lords as was required to pass bills. Faced with the diminution of their powers the peers opted for the lesser evil. It was against this backdrop that the 3rd Home Rule Bill was introduced in the British Parliament in April 1912. As was to be expected the bill was defeated in the House of Lords, but in contrast to 1893 passing the bill into law was now only delayed.

In reaction to the impending passage of the Home Rule Bill the Ulster Unionists set up a military body known as the Ulster Volunteer Force whose specific aim was to prevent the imposition of Home Rule in Ulster regardless of laws or bills democratically passed in parliament. Leading members of the Conservative Party and the Military and Legal establishment were quite open in their support of the Ulster Unionist cause. Indeed these same people would be trumpeting the need to defend democracy when it suited their aims. To arm this force a huge fund was set up and an arsenal of weapons was purchased in Germany. In April 1914 the UVF sealed off the port of Larne while they landed a shipment of 25,000 rifles and 3,000,000 rounds of ammunition. No attempt was made by either the RIC or the British Army to prevent the landings.

As a consequence to the arming the Ulster Unionists the Southern Nationalist Volunteers were forced to respond, but on a much smaller scale. The Ulster Volunteers had been bankrolled by some of the wealthiest businessmen in Britain and Ireland. People such as Lord Iveagh, head of Guinness's Breweries and the Merchant Banker Lord Rothschild, each contributed £100,000 and Rudyard Kipling, the writer, gave £50,000. Financial backing to the importation of arms for the Irish Volunteers was to be on a much more reduced scale.

In the early summer of 1914 Roger Casement addressed the lack of funding for arms. He went to London where he met with Alice Stopford-Green, a friend of longstanding. Casement convinced Mrs Green to call a meeting of some of her friends at which the subject of arming the Irish Volunteers would be addressed. Among those who attended with Casement and Stopford-Green, were Erskine and Mary Childers, Lord Ashbourne, Sir Alexander Lawrence, Alice Young, Mary Spring Rice, Captain Berkeley, Min Ryan, Conor O'Brien and Hugh O'Brien. All those attendees subscribed money to the purchase fund. Ironically of those who attended the meeting only Min Ryan was a Roman Catholic; all the other attendees were members of the Church of Ireland. At the meeting Alice Stopford-Green agreed to put up £750 and the others matched that sum between them thus giving a war chest of £1,500 which pales in comparison to the money that was available to the Ulster Unionists. It was Mary Spring Rice who then suggested that the rifles be purchased in Europe and brought into Ireland by boat. Originally it was proposed to use a fishing smack called the Santa Cruz, which operated out of Foyles, but when this vessel was inspected by Erskine Childers and Conor O’Brien it was deemed to be unsuitable because of the timeframe required to make her seaworthy.

With the money raised Darrell Figgis, an Anglo-Irish member of the Gaelic League, and Erskine Childers were sent to Liege to purchase arms. When they reached Liege they went to a firm of armours recommended by Roger Casement. The guns on offer there were of good quality and modern but were too expensive. The two men then moved on to Hamburg. In Hamburg Figgis managed to purchase 1,500 rifles and 45,000 rounds of ammunition from the firm of Moritz Magnus for shipment to Ireland. The rifles, which were 9 mm Mauser, were old fashioned and heavy but they were in perfect working order. One problem encountered by Figgis and Childers in Hamburg was that the German Government had issued an order that no guns were to be sold to Irish revolutionaries on account of the storm raised by the shipment to Carson's Volunteers. Figgis got around...
hand was a neighbour of Conor and Katharine (Kitty) O’Brien on Foyne’s Island. Tom was born in 1894 and he was about twenty years of age when he set off on his great adventure. Immediately after setting out they encountered very heavy fog at the mouth of the Shannon which lasted until the yacht was well clear of the Blasket Islands. Whilst the fog made sailing hazardous it also had the effect of precluding the police from interfering with them.

It had been agreed, prior to setting out, that the Kelpie and the Asgard would rendezvous at Cowes, near the Isle of Wight, prior to sailing the final stage to collect the arms. Erskine Childers and his crew were delayed leaving Anglesey so O’Brien and his crew arrived at Cowes on 6 July and waited anxiously before the second boat eventually arrived. The crew of the Asgard included Erskine Childers and his wife Mary, Gordon Shepherd, a commissioned officer of the newly formed Royal Flying Corps, Mary Spring Rice from Foyne’s, who was a close friend of Childers and two sailors Charles Duggan and Patrick McGlinchey from Gola Island off Donegal.

By the time the Asgard arrived at Cowes O’Brien had sent some telegrams to try and ascertain where she was and when Childers found out about this he had an angry exchange with O’Brien. It was not the only time that the two men had a disagreement as Childers’ secretive nature seemed to irk O’Brien. In fairness to O’Brien when the Asgard was long overdue it was difficult to know what Childers expected of him. In any event the two yachts eventually left Cowes on Friday 10 July and headed for the Ruytgingen Lightship where they were to meet with the Gladiator, the tug which was bringing the guns from Hamburg.

O’Brien and his crew left Cowes first and had a head start in the race up the English Channel. When they had passed Dover O’Brien dispensed with the appearance of the Kelpie as a pleasure craft and lightened the load aboard. Any piece of furniture or equipment that was not essential was put over the side and by the time she arrived at the Ruyttingen Lightship she was a much lighter vessel. The Kelpie reached the lightship well ahead of Childers. As the Kelpie pulled alongside the Gladiator a smiling Darrell Figgis was there to greet them. When they had tied up O’Brien greeted Figgis in Irish, oblivious to the fact that he was to act the part of a Mexican revolutionary. Fortunately the German crew of the arms tug were either not aware of the difference between Irish and Spanish or did not care.

The Kelpie was a smaller yacht than the Asgard and O’Brien soon realized that he would not be able to take half the consignment as had been planned. Instead he loaded 600 rifles and 16,000 rounds of ammunition which he felt was all the yacht could safely carry. This decision it seems added to the friction between himself and Childers. The rifles were wrapped in sacks in bundles of ten and were larger and heavier than had been planned for. The ammunition was stored in wooden boxes, each containing 1,000 rounds, which were also very heavy and everything seemed to be conspiring against the smugglers. The rifles and ammunition were transferred on to the Kelpie leaving the Asgard to deal with the remaining 900 rifles and 29,000 rounds of ammunition.

When the cargo had been put on board O’Brien exchanged a bottle of whiskey, with the skipper of the tug, for an enormous loaf of black bread which it appeared was the main sustenance of the crew on the return journey. Just as O’Brien and his crew pulled away from the lightship the Asgard came into view. The fact that neither O’Brien nor Childers made contact with each other at this stage is interesting and it serves to emphasize the rift that had grown between the men. An irony that was not lost on O’Brien was the fact that the day that 1,500 rifles were being loaded on to ships for the Irish Nationalist Volunteers was the 12 July, a day sacred to the Orangemen of Ulster and the UVF.

On the return journey the heavily laden vessel ran into fog in the English Channel and encountered a squadron of large battleships speeding to a naval review at Spithead. Fortunately, because of the impending outbreak of war those naval ships were not interested in the yacht, heavily laden with rifles for Ireland, which was literally sailing under their noses. Progress by the Kelpie was slow and eventually the shortage of food forced O’Brien and his crew to put in to Penzance, in Cornwall, to purchase supplies. While ashore they got news of the impending outbreak of war. From O’Brien’s own account it is clear that the return journey was anything but
pleasant, as they met with fog, heavy seas, water was everywhere and they had to endure very cramped quarters.

When they arrived off the Welsh coast they decided to put in to St Tudwal's Roads, where they tried to act as inconspicuously as possible while they waited to meet with Myles and his yacht. They briefly went ashore at the little port of Aberaeron, where the local publican and harbour pilot asked no awkward questions and assumed that O'Brien and his crew were just 'mad yachtsmen'.

After a few days lying up near Aberaich they set out to rendezvous with the Chota at the island of Bardsey. They were due to rendezvous on Friday 24 July. Unfortunately, a storm blew up and there was no sign of the Chota. O'Brien and his crew returned to the shelter of St Tudwal's Roads until the storm had abated. Here they actually met with Sir Thomas Myles and his crew, who were also seeking shelter in the little Welsh port. If O'Brien and his crew appeared unlikely revolutionaries, the crew of the Chota was the total antithesis of a revolutionary group. The skipper, Sir Thomas Myles, was a fifty-seven-year-old surgeon and professor who had been knighted for his services to the medical profession in Ireland. The other two members of the crew were James Creed Meredith, a barrister, who later became a judge and Captain Harvey de Montmorency, a British military officer.

The Chota was a much larger boat than the Kelpie, and would have no problem taking the cargo on board. In the storm that had forced both yachts to seek shelter in port the Chota had just split her top sail. Although the Chota was steam powered, Myles was reluctant to proceed without first having the repairs carried out to the top sail. On foot of this it was decided to postpone the landing of these arms by one week until 2 August 1914. Dermot Coffey, one of the Kelpie's crew, was put ashore in Wales and he made his way by the Holyhead mail-boat to Dublin, where he contacted Eoin MacNeill and communicated the new arrangement. One positive consequence of the impending outbreak of war was that all British naval vessels were recalled to port to prepare for war. This worked in favour of the gun-runners as naval ships, that otherwise would have been shadowing or intercepting them, were now tied up in port.

Having taken on his cargo Myles and his crew put in at Aberaich where it was arranged that Myles would stay with the yacht while the top sail was repaired. Captain de Montmorency and Creed Meredith would return to Dublin by the steam packet from Holyhead, as sudden absences might not be easy to explain because of the nature of their employment. It was arranged that the two men would return for the following weekend. It appears that Cahill and Fitzsimons stayed on in Wales with Sir Thomas Myles while the sail was being repaired and that they sailed to Kilcoe on the Chota.

Meanwhile the Kelpie, with only Conor and Kitty O'Brien on board, headed towards Dun Laoghaire. On their way they were hailed by a British destroyer but as it was obvious that the boat was sailing light in the water the skipper...
of the destroyer did not even bother carrying out a search. This close call only served to emphasize the importance of having transshipped the cargo. It also suited O'Brien's purpose to give the impression that he had delivered "his cargo" in Wexford. It seems that the two O'Briens and the Kelpie arrived at Kilcoole to assist in landing the arms.

When Meredith and De Montmorency returned the following weekend the top sail had been repaired and Myles and his crew left Wales and set out for Kilcoole, County Wicklow. Myles arrived off the beach at Kilcoole about midnight on the night of 1 August and anchored his boat there. A very professional operation was instigated and a flotilla of small boats offloaded the cargo as she lay off shore and brought the arms on to the beach where they were soon transferred into cars and vans that had been parked in the grounds of the nearby Holy Faith Convent, out of sight of prying eyes. The operation was under the command of Sean T O'Kelly and Sean Fitzgibbon. When two local RIC men Constables Dalton and Webb tried to intervene they were apprehended and held captive under armed guard until the operation was safely completed. The whole operation took about four hours and it was a model of efficiency and as dawn came up on the Irish coast arms laden vans and cars were pulling out of Kilcoole and heading for arms dumps and safe houses in various locations. One charabanc, loaded with rifles, broke an axle at Little Bray, but the driver who was a local man named Jim Rosney managed to rouse some of his neighbours and the guns were taken and hidden in local houses until they could be moved to their final destinations. When the RIC came on the scene all they found was a charabanc with a broken axle and some straw and debris on the road. It never occurred to the police that the axle of the charabanc broke because the vehicle was overloaded with guns for the Irish Volunteers.

In a sense the efficiency of the operation at Kilcoole has contributed to it being overlooked and forgotten. The conflict between Childers and O'Brien did not help the Kilcoole operation getting due recognition either, as Childers had the ear of the main organizers who chose to see O'Brien in the manner that Childers had portrayed him. It was only in the 1960s, when Figgis, MacNeill and Childers had died, that Bulmer Hobson grudgingly admitted that the importation of the arms could not have been successful without the courage and commitment of O'Brien and his crew. This point was also verified by Creede Meredith and Sir Thomas Myles when they saw the conditions that the crew of the Kelpie had to endure, when they met up at Abercorth, Kilcoole, the Kelpie, the Connah and their crews have all been treated very badly by many Irish historians who seem to ignore their contribution to the arming of the volunteers.

The sister operation, at Howth, where the Asgard landed 900 rifles on the previous Sunday was carried out in broad daylight and it attracted the attention of the RIC who attempted to seize the cargo. This led indirectly to the deaths of a number of civilians at Bachelor's Walk in Dublin when British soldiers opened fire on a jeering crowd which was in stark contrast to the total absence of police or military at the arms landings by the UVF at Larne and Donaghadee.

References

1. In some accounts it is stated that the rifles were actually purchased in Liege and shipped on to Hamburg. In the Figgis account, published in F X Martin's monumental work The North Gun-Running and the Kilcoole Gun-Running: Recollections & Documents, first published in 1964 and reissued in 2014, he states that the rifles were purchased in Hamburg after first viewing merchandise in Liege. Ironically the firm of Moritz-Magnus, from whom the arms were purchased actually had the major portion of the consignment warehoused at Liege, thus facilitating their shipment by rail to Hamburg.

2. Sir Thomas Myles (1857-1937) was born into a family of Limerick merchants. He qualified as a surgeon and went on to become President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland.

3. Bardsey Island lies off the Llyn Peninsula in North Wales.

4. Conor O'Brien wrote a very interesting account of his life as a sailor, entitled From Three Yachts; a Cruises Outlook first published in London in 1928 and was reprinted in 1950 and 2014.

5. Sean T O'Kelly (1883-1966) was President of Ireland from 1945 to 1959. A feature of the O'Kelly presidency was his efforts to heal the wounds of the Civil War. He was married to a sister of Min Ryan.

6. Sean Fitzgibbon was active in the Irish Volunteers. He supported MacNeill in opposition to the Easter Rising and he brought the countermand order to Limerick on Easter Sunday 1916.

7. As the military and police marched back to Dublin after having failed to secure the rifles at Howth they were joined by a large crowd and it seems stones may even have been thrown. The officer in charge appears to have panicked and ordered the soldiers to open fire. Three civilians were killed and a number were wounded. Ever afterwards the regiment involved in The Kings Own Scottish Borderers Regiment was known to Dubliners as "The Kings Own Scottish Murderers Regiment".

Left: Cartoon depicting Mary Spring Rice, from an album at Mount Trenchard (Courtesy of John Cushen).