

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY, 1916–1923*

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ABSTRACT. *Based on a sample of about 5,000 members, this article offers the first comprehensive social profile of the IRA covering the entire period of the Irish revolution. The picture that emerges is of an organization composed largely of unpropertied, unmarried, young men of the middling classes, increasingly disproportionately dominated by urban, skilled, and socially mobile activists. Officers tended to be slightly older and of slightly higher social status than their men. Sinn Féin activists were older again but otherwise shared these characteristics, as did the IRA in Britain. This dependence on urban and skilled or white-collar members, the reverse of what republicans and most historians have believed, may be attributable to a combination of the greater risks and greater organizational opportunities faced by the IRA in towns. Nevertheless, the movement did attract rural and labouring members, and did to some extent transcend class and geographical boundaries. IRA units were almost never segregated along class lines, and were usually built around familial and neighbourhood networks. Also, as the revolution progressed, activists' previous social identities were superseded by a new and essentially egalitarian identity as comrades and guerrillas.*

W. B. Yeats 'met them at close of day / Coming with vivid faces / From counter or desk'.¹ Edith Somerville dismissed them variously as 'tom fools' and 'half-educated cads and upstarts'.² Erskine Childers praised them as 'the soul of a new Ireland, taken as a whole the finest young men in the country'.³ To their neighbours and supporters, they were most often simply 'the boys'. 'They' were the Irish Volunteers – after 1919 the Irish Republican Army – and the question of what sort of people they were is a crucial one for our understanding of the organization, and of the Irish revolution as a whole.

The IRA was part of a much wider phenomenon of martial voluntarism sweeping Ireland between 1912 and 1922. Republican men joined the Volunteers, republican women formed Cumann na mBan, and republican boys had Fianna Éireann. For republican socialists there was the independent

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¹ W. B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916'.

² Edith Somerville to Col. John Somerville, 24 Nov. 1917; Somerville to Ethel Smyth, 22 Apr. 1922 (Queen's University Special Collections, Somerville and Ross papers, lots 877 and 878).

³ Erskine Childers, 'The Irish revolution', p. 8 (Trinity College Dublin, Library, Childers papers, MS 7808/29).

Irish Citizen Army.⁴ The republican ‘army’ and its auxiliaries were preceded by the unionist Ulster Volunteer Force and the Irish Party’s rival National Volunteers. Both of these bodies in turn delivered recruits to the Irish (10th and 16th) divisions of the New Army. The Ulster Special Constabulary and the Irish Free State’s National Army put yet more men into new uniforms in 1921 and 1922.

Nevertheless, it is the partisans of the republic who stand out as the leading actors in the revolutionary drama. Theirs was by far the most aggressive and violent organization of the ‘troubles’. It was they who launched the Easter rising of 1916 and precipitated the subsequent guerrilla wars, thereby claiming the lion’s share of victims.⁵ What set these men apart from their school friends and workmates and neighbours? How did they become warriors, killers, and martyrs?

At the time, these questions were usually answered in terms of moral or national character. The rebels were – depending on one’s point of view – selfless patriots, nihilist fanatics, or depraved thugs. The revolution was represented as either a national awakening or criminal anarchy. Historians since have rarely addressed the rebels’ social identity, and those who have done so have generally confined themselves to local studies covering only a portion of the revolutionary period. Many assumptions – about the volunteers’ youth, gender, class, religion, ethnicity, politics, and motives, and how these may have changed over time – therefore remain untested.

Surprisingly, however, useful data for this task are plentiful rather than scarce. Indeed, Ireland’s is quite possibly the best-documented revolution in modern history. For a ‘secret army’, the guerrillas left an extraordinary paper trail through their own and their opponents’ records, as well as in the daily and weekly press. This continued long after the wars were over, as gunmen claimed pensions, wrote memoirs, and commemorated themselves and their comrades. Once identified, their personal and family histories can be tracked back even further through census and land records. The same or analogous sources supply a similar range of information on the members of allied or opposed organizations. Using this material, what follows is a social profile of the IRA and associated groups, encompassing the whole of Ireland (and Britain) from 1916 to 1923.

I

Psychological analysis and the ‘terrorist personality’⁶ aside, there are many different ways to ask who joined the IRA. How old were they? Were they married? What sort of work did they do? How much property did they or their

⁴ Although this was largely confined to Dublin and effectively defunct after 1916.

⁵ See Peter Hart, ‘The geography of revolution in Ireland, 1917–1923’, *Past & Present*, 155 (1997), pp. 142–3.

⁶ For a variety of psychological perspectives, see Walter Reich, ed., *Origins of terrorism* (Cambridge, 1990).

families own? Where did they live? How did members of the IRA compare with those of other organizations?

Answering these questions also requires a definition of what it meant to belong. Membership and commitment ebbed and flowed as the levels of risk and political popularity rose and fell. On paper, the army's strength peaked at over 100,000 during the 1918 conscription crisis, and at over 70,000 after the July 1921 truce.⁷ In early 1921, at the height of the guerrilla war against Britain, and again in early 1922, after the IRA split over the Anglo-Irish treaty, a third or more of these men dropped off unit rolls.⁸ By October of the latter year, the volunteers – now fighting a second war against the Irish Free State – had lost around 90 per cent of their pre-treaty strength.⁹ Well over 100,000 men were volunteers at some point during the revolution, but many were involved for only a few months, and only a small fraction belonged from beginning to end.

Joining was not the same as participation, however. The IRA was divided territorially into fifty-odd brigades (whose number changed nearly every year), and further subdivided into battalions and companies. Every unit distinguished between members who were reliable and unreliable; between those who were active and those who were not. Broadly speaking, 'reliable' men could be called upon to perform occasional tasks while 'active' men were regularly engaged in actual operations. Between 1919 and 1921, only one- to two-thirds of even the most aggressive companies were deemed reliable by their officers: less than half of the Mid-Clare and Sligo Brigades, around 60 per cent of the Dublin Brigade.¹⁰ Activists represented an even smaller fraction of the total membership – usually less than 20 per cent – except in the later stages of the civil war when the rest of the army simply melted away.

It is this active and reliable core of committed guerrillas – 'the men who count' in the words of Cathal Brugha¹¹ – who are the primary subjects of this study and who largely populate its statistical samples, numbering approximately 5,000 volunteers. This focus is partly a reflection of the main available sources. Newspapers, Royal Irish Constabulary, British and National Army records, prison registers, and IRA rolls provide the ranks, addresses, occupations, and ages of those men who were under police surveillance, or were

⁷ Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish republic* (London, 1937), p. 241; Army strength tables, Oct. and Nov. 1921 (University College Dublin, Archives (UCD), Richard Mulcahy papers, P17a/18).

⁸ For the situation in 1921, see North Cork Brigade company rolls, Feb.–June 1921 (National Library of Ireland (NLI), Florence O'Donoghue papers, MS 31,223). For 1922, see North Cork Brigade report, 29 Feb. 1922 (UCD, Ernie O'Malley papers, P17a/87); Carlow Brigade reports (UCD, O'Malley papers, P17a/73, 74).

⁹ See 1st Southern Div. strength report, c. Oct. 1922 (UCD, O'Malley papers, P17a/89); O/C 1st Southern Div. to Deputy C/S., 2 Mar. 1923 (UCD, O'Malley papers P17a/90).

¹⁰ David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish life 1913–1921: provincial experience of war and revolution* (Dublin, 1977), p. 219; Sligo Brigade returns, June 1921 (UCD, Mulcahy papers, P7/A/22); 'Figures for Companies Working', 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade (NLI, MS 901).

¹¹ *Official report: debate on the treaty between Great Britain and Ireland* (Dublin, 1922), p. 329.

arrested, imprisoned, or killed.¹² Since most of these men came to public or official attention by virtue of their activity, it was the activists' vital statistics that got recorded.

The resulting membership sample (see Tables 1–4 and 9) is divided between officers and other ranks, and between three periods of time, corresponding roughly to different stages of the revolution: those of mass movement (1917–19), open insurrection against the British government (1920–1), and civil war against its northern and southern successor states (1922–3). Figures for the Easter rising of 1916 are presented separately. Many individuals appear in the figures for more than one period. The sample has also been divided geographically, first between Dublin and provincial Ireland, and then between the four provinces of Munster, Connaught, Leinster and Ulster. Again because of its sources, the sample favours the more active units in Dublin and Munster.

II

The IRA drew members from every walk of life and from every sector of the Irish economy. The appeal of militant republicanism crossed all occupational boundaries. Nevertheless, certain professions stand out as contributing more than their share of rebels, among them the building trades (carpenters, plasterers, bricklayers, painters), drapers' assistants, creamery workers, hairdressers, and teachers. As in other countries and revolutions, medical students and shoe and bootmakers were in the vanguard. Other groups, such as fishermen and dock labourers, were almost completely unrepresented.

Table 1 groups IRA members together into broad categories of employment. The comparative census figures from 1911 and 1926 describe all occupied adult men. The former include all of Ireland; the latter only the twenty-six counties which made up the Irish Free State. Since northern Ireland was more urban and industrialized, the differences are considerable. Nevertheless, because the majority of the northern population was hostile to the IRA by virtue of their political and religious loyalties, and because the great bulk of the active membership (and the sample) lived in southern Ireland, the 1926 numbers are a better reflection of the organization's pool of potential recruits.

If we compare provincial volunteers with employed adult men as a whole, some clear patterns emerge. Those who worked behind counters or desks – shop assistants and clerks – made up only 4 per cent of the workforce outside Dublin but accounted for one tenth to one fifth of the active membership. Skilled tradesmen and artisans were also twice or three times as likely to be found in the IRA as in the general population. Those who fell into the unskilled or semi-skilled category tended not to be casual labourers but rather porters,

¹² Many of these sources by themselves provide only partial information: addresses and ages only, in the case of General Prisons Board (GPB) files (National Archives), for example. For the derivation of particular samples, see the notes to tables.

Table 1. *Occupations of volunteers in provincial Ireland (%)*

Sample...	Officers			Men			Census	
	1917-19	1920-1	1922-3	1917-19	1920-1	1922-3	1911	1926
	682	461	150	1,439	1,985	1,089		
Farmer/son	27	22	21	40	29	13	38	49
Farm labourer	5	4	8	11	12	19	22	17
Un/semi-skilled	4	5	9	9	15	27		10
Skilled	23	26	28	16	19	23		9
Shop assist/clerk	19	22	19	12	14	11		4
Professional	9	7	7	1	4	2		2
Merchant/son	10	11	4	7	5	2		4
Student	1	0.3	—	1	1	1		1
Other	3	4	3	2	2	3		4

These figures cover the whole of Ireland except for the Dublin urban area (see Table 3). Men described simply as 'labourers' were categorized as 'farm labourers' (70%) or as 'unskilled' (30%).

Sources: A day-by-day survey of *Irish Times* and *Cork Examiner*, 1917-23; RIC county inspectors' monthly reports, 1917-21; Public Record Office (PRO), CO 904/102-16 and reports of illegal drilling, 1917-18: CO 904/122; reports of military courts of inquiry, 1920-2: WO 35/146A-160 and register of prisoners in military prisons: WO 35/143; National Army prisoners' location books, charge records and prison ledgers, 1922-4: Irish Military Archives (MA), P/1-6 and miscellaneous; IRA prison rolls, 1923; MA, A/1135; A/1137; A/1138; A/1185. The division of occupations into categories follows Guy Routh, *Occupation and pay in Great Britain, 1906-1979* (London, 1980).

drivers, factory workers, or the like. These were men with steady jobs for the most part, few of whom were unemployed until the recession of 1921.¹³

Agriculture absorbed most of Ireland's male labour, so its consistent under-representation in the ranks of the IRA is the most notable aspect of these statistics. It is also the one we can explore furthest, as we can contrast the 1911 and 1926 census figures and break down the former by age and religion. This allows us to compare IRA members solely with members of their own generation, roughly identifiable in the 1911 census as occupied men aged 15-44 (for volunteers' ages, see below). Farmers and their sons made up only 32 per cent of this age group (as opposed to 38 per cent of adult men), while the proportion who were labourers rose to 24 per cent (from 22 per cent). Younger people were thus slightly less likely to work on farms, so the gap between volunteers and their age cohort was less than with the general population. This

¹³ Exact employment figures are unavailable, but there is a large body of more impressionistic evidence to support this statement, including many newspaper and other reports that name volunteers' employers.

probably remained true in 1926, but the census of that year also shows a much larger proportion of farmers and a lower proportion of farm labourers than in 1911. As already noted, the later figures are a better description of the IRA's recruitment pool in ethnic and geographic terms, and they also reflect social change over the intervening sixteen-year period. The pre-war numbers must be judged accordingly.

In addition, since volunteers were overwhelmingly Catholic (see below), perhaps this should also be taken into account in defining the guerrillas' peer group. In this case, the rurality gap between organization and population widens, as Catholic men were more likely to be 'persons engaged in agriculture' (42 per cent were farmers and sons, 24 per cent were labourers in 1911). Thus, the guerrillas' ethnic reference group was more rural than the general population while their age group was less so. Ultimately, all of these statistics still point to the same conclusion. Except for rank-and-file members between 1917 and 1919, considerably less than half the volunteers worked on farms, whether as sons or employees: a significant deficit in a predominantly agricultural economy.

Throughout the revolution, then, the guerrillas were disproportionately skilled, trained, and urban. As Appendix table 9 demonstrates, this was a genuinely national characteristic, shared by units in every part of the country. The boys of Connaught may have been more likely to be working on a farm than the boys of Leinster, but both were less likely to be doing so than their provincial peers. The same was not true of their parents. A study of over 1,000 fathers of volunteers in county Cork shows that the majority were farmers and almost none had white-collar jobs.¹⁴ Most volunteers had grown up on farms but, unlike their fathers, only half or fewer had stayed. Again, this set them somewhat apart from their peers as well as their parents. According to Michael Hout's study of social mobility in Ireland, 58 per cent of farmer's sons born between 1908 and 1925 were still working on family farms at age twenty.¹⁵

As the revolution progressed, it accentuated some of these tendencies. Rural volunteers became even less prominent after 1919, while tradesmen became more so. In the civil war, though, we can also detect a shift towards a more proletarian army, as farmers' and merchants' sons were replaced by unskilled or semi-skilled workers. However, as new members were scarce in the republican 'legion of the rearguard', these represent shifts in commitment rather than in recruitment. After 1921, the question was not so much who was joining as who was leaving.

The urban orientation of the IRA is all the more striking when compared to what republicans themselves thought. In this regard, one GHQ inspector's

¹⁴ Fathers' occupations were derived from the manuscript returns for the 1911 census in the National Archives (NA). Tom Garvin found a similar pattern in his study of the 'IRB/Sinn Fein/IRA elite' between 1913 and 1922: 'The anatomy of a nationalist revolution: Ireland, 1858–1928', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 28 (1986), p. 485.

¹⁵ Out of a survey sample of 561 farmers' sons: Michael Hout, *Following in father's footsteps: social mobility in Ireland* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 127.

opinion could stand for many: ‘the population of all towns is bad. A little terrorism might have a good effect.’¹⁶ Florence O’Donoghue was thus reflecting a strong consensus among IRA men when he wrote that urban nationalism was ‘shallow and rootless’, the volunteers being ‘predominantly a product of the country, having deeper roots in old traditions’.¹⁷ This view of the rebellion as an expression of an ancient, ‘hidden Ireland’ was endorsed by Daniel Corkery, the influential nationalist writer, who added that the town–country ‘antithesis’ was ‘one of those inevitable, deeply-based differences that not every historian takes notice of’.¹⁸

Corkery was correct in his view of historians, if not in his theory of history. For many years, the only social descriptions of the rebels were provided by the ‘instant histories’ of W. Alison Phillips and Sir James O’Connor. Phillips’s *The revolution in Ireland*, which made use of confidential Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) files, categorized the volunteers (or ‘Sinn Feiners’, a blanket term) as ‘shop assistants and town labourers’.¹⁹ In O’Connor’s equally unfriendly view (*A history of Ireland, 1798–1924*), ‘the “war” was the work of two thousand men and boys, nearly all of them of a low grade of society – farm hands, shop hands and the like’.²⁰ A contemporary but less scholarly ‘study’, *The real Ireland*, was the work of C. H. Bretherton, the *Morning Post*’s hibernophobic and libellous reporter in Ireland. By his account, the guerrillas were ‘a horde of proletarians, grocers’ curates, farm labourers, porters, stable boys, car-conductors and what not’.²¹ The variously dismissive tones used indicate both disdain and the perceived obviousness of the question, but it is interesting to note the mention of shop assistants and the absence of farmers in each case.

The pioneering analysis of the social composition of the Volunteers came with David Fitzpatrick’s path-breaking study of the revolution in county Clare, *Politics and Irish life*. His findings do reveal an overwhelmingly farm-based rank and file in 1917–19, led by a somewhat less agricultural officer corps. Clare itself was intensely rural and quite poor, so this is not surprising. Fitzpatrick does not provide occupational figures for the years after 1919 so we do not know if Clare matched the nationwide decline in farming volunteers. However, he does describe the emergence of a town–country divide in 1921, with the guerrillas favouring the countryside.²²

More recently, Joost Augusteijn has examined the general membership of ten companies in four brigades in July 1921 and concludes that ‘although

¹⁶ GHQ inspector’s report on Roscommon and Leitrim, 17 Oct. 1921 (Irish Military Archives (MA), A/0747).

¹⁷ Florence O’Donoghue, *Tomas MacCurtain: soldier and patriot* (Tralee, 1955), p. 59.

¹⁸ Daniel Corkery, foreword to *Tomas MacCurtain*, p. 11.

¹⁹ W. Alison Phillips, *The revolution in Ireland* (London, 1923), pp. 176–7.

²⁰ Sir James O’Connor, *A history of Ireland, 1798–1924*, II (London, 1925), p. 296.

²¹ C. H. Bretherton, *The real Ireland* (London, 1925), p. 80. This book was withdrawn soon after publication because of threatened lawsuits. For further social and frankly racial analysis, see Bretherton, ‘Irish backgrounds’, *Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 1922, pp. 692–3.

²² Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life*, pp. 202–4, 220–4.

Table 2. *Median value of volunteers' family farms in county Cork*

Sample...	Officers			Men			Census
	1917-19	1920-1	1922-3	1917-19	1920-1	1922-3	1911
	44	78	17	210	356	72	
	£31	£24	£23	£22	£20	£25	£14

This table was assembled from manuscript census returns (NA) and land valuation records (Irish Valuation Office). Official valuations often underestimated the real productivity or saleable price of land, but they do provide a reasonable measure of the relative value of different farms.

active members... had a predominantly urban background, the larger part of the rank and file in the provinces was rural'.²³ This is an interesting hypothesis, but an unproven one because, as Augusteijn's careful presentation shows, none of his chosen companies are in urban areas and he assumes that sons automatically shared their fathers' occupations (as recorded in the 1911 census). As detailed above, such was not the case.

For those volunteers who were farmers or farmers' sons, social status was defined not by occupation alone, but also by the value and size of their land. The former is the best guide to a farmer's worth, as an acre of land might be meadow or bog, entirely productive or wholly useless. Unfortunately, sufficient data on property can only properly be collected on a local basis, so my sample in Table 2 is confined to county Cork. From these numbers we can see that IRA family farms (mostly still owned by their parents) were well above the county average in rateable value. At any point during the revolution, the typical volunteer would have been significantly better off than many of his neighbours. The same pattern emerges if we substitute acreage as the unit of comparison. IRA farms tended to be substantially larger than average as well. As with occupations, the IRA tended not to draw its members from the highest or lowest in society, but from the middling ranks in between.²⁴

The Dublin city IRA had no farmers, of course, but did it otherwise conform to provincial patterns? Dublin's data are presented in Table 3. Like their country comrades, the Dublin Brigades drew heavily on the skilled trades, shops, and offices. Unlike other areas, however, they depended to a greater degree on unskilled members at the outset (again, usually not casual or general labourers) but became less working class and more white collar as time went on. Other cities followed a different course, however. The Cork city battalions

²³ Joost Augusteijn, *From public defiance to guerrilla warfare: the experiences of ordinary volunteers in the Irish war of independence, 1916-1921* (Dublin, 1996), p. 353.

²⁴ Joost Augusteijn reaches a broadly similar conclusion for volunteers as of July 1921: *From public defiance to guerrilla warfare*, pp. 360-2.

Table 3. *Occupations of volunteers in Dublin, 1917–23 (%)*

Sample...	Officers			Men			Census	
	1917–19	1920–1	1922–3	1917–19	1920–1	1922–3	1911	1926
	49	86	19	201	507	122		
Un/semi-skilled	31	27	26	43	46	37	35	44
Skilled	24	23	21	33	23	23		23
Shop assist/clerk	22	32	32	17	18	35		15
Professional	12	9	11	0.5	2	1	2	4
Merchant/son	4	6	5	1	3	—	5	5
Student	2	1	—	3	3	2	2	2
Other	4	2	5	1	4	1	3	6

This area includes the suburban towns of Rathmines, Blackrock, etc., and is roughly coterminous with the Dublin Metropolitan Police District. The census figures for 1911 do not include much of this suburban area, and so are not strictly comparable with the 1926 data. Sources in addition to those noted in Table 1: Irish Command Dublin District raid and search reports, 1920–1: PRO, WO 35/70–9.

moved in the opposite direction, being much more likely to have unskilled workers in 1922–3 than in earlier years.²⁵

Were officers very different from their men? Outside Dublin, they were much more likely to live in towns or cities, and to be employed in skilled and middle-class jobs. The same gap in occupational status can be found in the capital, albeit to a lesser degree. Far more officers were professionals or were involved in shopkeeping, and fewer were unskilled working men, but tradesmen were spread equally among the ranks. Provincial officers did become more working class and less mercantile after the treaty split, and the gap closed somewhat where farm values and sizes were concerned, but a noticeable difference remained. Perhaps most noteworthy was the scarcity of farm labourers among the lieutenants, captains, and commandants who ran the movement in the parishes. Farmers did far better than their servants in this respect. It was not impossible for employees to command their employers, but the reality was usually the other way around.

Another noteworthy difference between the ranks is that there was much less change over time in officers' backgrounds than there was among ordinary volunteers. If we add up the percentage differences in each occupational category as we move from period to period, we find that officers' numbers shifted by a total of 33 per cent between 1917 and 1923, while the total for their men was 57 per cent. Officers were significantly more stable as a group. Of course, this could at least partly be attributed to variations in samples, but it is

²⁵ See Peter Hart, *The IRA and its enemies: violence and community in Cork, 1916–1923* (Oxford, 1998).

probably also related to the fact that officers were much more likely to be activists – which was usually how they acquired their rank in the first place. This heightened sense of commitment meant they were also far less likely to drop out or abandon the republican cause. As evidence of this, the difference between officers and men was greatest between 1921 and 1922. The guerrillas who fought the Free State were, by and large, the same men who had led the struggle against the Black and Tans.

Did occupation or social status determine who joined a particular unit? Companies were often formed around a particular workplace, but any kind of stratification – let alone segregation – between units seems to have been very rare. One apparent exception was the Limerick city IRA. Here the volunteers fell out after the Easter rising, when the local ‘boys’ failed to rise alongside Dublin. This was not unusual, but the consequences were. The rival factions split and each formed their own battalion, which stayed apart until 1921. The division was not merely political or personal, but also social. The old guard of the 1st Battalion, criticized for their inactivity, ‘was nearly confined to the rugby clubs’ while the combative 2nd Battalion ‘were more working men’.²⁶ ‘The 2nd Battalion were a different type of people – decent fellows but they were all working people. The 1st Battalion were all white collar workers... I think that was one of the reasons the 1st Battalion didn’t like them – the fact that they were all working men.’²⁷ This division along class lines was, as far as I know, unique.²⁸

III

The volunteers were much more homogeneous when it came to age and marital status. According to the sample presented in Table 4, at least three-quarters were in their late teens or twenties in any given year and less than 5 per cent were forty or older. Officers were much less likely to be adolescents, especially after 1921, and were consistently – if only slightly – older as a group. The membership as a whole matured by one year over the six years between 1917 and 1923. This suggests that while hundreds of activists remained in the struggle for the whole period – and raised the average age as a consequence – turnover in the membership kept the median age fairly constant. Some new recruits continued to trickle in (at least until 1922) and other members faded out as they got older.

The typical volunteer was not only youthful but also unmarried. The two go together of course, but IRA members were unusually unwed even by Irish standards. Of men aged 20–4 in the Irish Free State 4 per cent were married in

²⁶ Interviews with Sean Hynes and George Embrush (UCD, O’Malley papers, P17b/129, 130).

²⁷ Richard Mulcahy interview with Lt Gen. Peadar McMahon (UCD, Mulcahy papers, P7D/43). See also Deputy C/S report on Mid-Limerick Brigade, 7 Nov. 1921 (MA, A/0739).

²⁸ Although the rugby republicans of Limerick do bear a certain resemblance to the Irish Rugby Football Union ‘Pals’ Company of the 7th Royal Dublin Fusiliers, formed in 1914. See David Fitzpatrick, ‘The logic of collective sacrifice: Ireland and the British army, 1914–1918’, *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), pp. 1029–30.

Table 4. *Ages of volunteers in Ireland (%)*

Sample...	Officers			Men		
	1917-19	1920-1	1922-3	1917-19	1920-1	1922-3
	675	561	335	2,052	2,722	1,409
Under 20	14	11	3	23	20	17
20-9	65	68	73	59	68	75
30-9	20	19	20	14	9	7
40-9	2	2	3	3	2	1
50-9	1	1	—	1	0.1	0.1
Median age	25	25	26	23	24	24

Sources besides those used in Tables 1 and 2: Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), GPB records, prisoner records, cartons 3-6 (NA); prisoner files in the Art O'Brien papers (NLI, MS 8443-5). Ages were calculated as of 1918, 1920, and 1922.

1926, rising to 20 per cent among those aged 25-9.²⁹ Out of a sample of 572 IRA prisoners in 1923 whose marital status is known – and whose median age was 25 – less than 5 per cent (27) were married.³⁰ And, since a higher proportion of the population was married in urban areas (32 per cent of those aged 25-9), where most active volunteers lived, the marital gap between them and their peers was probably even greater.

Being young and single meant that Irish guerrillas had less to risk (although, of course, celibacy might have been a consequence of activism as well as a contributing factor). It could also mean that they had more to rebel against. A man's position in his community depended as much upon age as upon income, land, or occupation. For most IRA men, this put them in a very subordinate position. 'The boys' were farmers' or shopkeepers' sons rather than owners; apprentices or journeymen rather than tradesmen or masters; junior clerks and assistant teachers. Property, money, and security, like marriage, lay in the future.³¹

IV

To report that IRA membership was exclusively male may state the obvious, but the first thing that needs to be said about the gender exclusivity of the volunteers is that it was not representative of the revolution as a whole. There was nothing inherently masculine about militant republicanism. Thousands of women believed as fervently and participated as enthusiastically, either as members of Sinn Fein or Cumann na mBan (a women's paramilitary

²⁹ Robert E. Kennedy, *The Irish: emigration, marriage, and fertility* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 169.

³⁰ IRA prison and internment camp rolls, 1923 (MA, A/1135, 1137, 1138).

³¹ For further discussion of the social dimensions of the volunteers' youth, see Peter Hart, 'Youth culture and the Cork IRA' in David Fitzpatrick, ed., *Revolution? Ireland, 1917-1923* (Dublin, 1990).

organization allied to the volunteers) or as individuals outside any formal body.

Nevertheless, it is one of the interesting features of the revolution that women were often equal – and equally violent – participants in its early stages, but were increasingly confined to an auxiliary role as the movement drifted into guerrilla war. As the front lines of the campaign moved from marching, canvassing, and street fighting in 1917 and 1918 to ambush and assassination in 1919 and 1920, women found themselves left in the rear echelons. They were active still, but largely left out of the action. The Volunteers – and armed struggle – remained a boys' club throughout.³² The guerrillas' rise to power within the movement was only complete in 1920, however, and was still contested thereafter. It took time for the IRA to emerge as a distinctive entity within the republican movement, and masculinization was an integral part of this militarization. This changed again after the 1921 truce, when politics came up from underground, and in 1922 and 1923, when most male activists were interned or on the run. Elections and prisoners' rights became key battlegrounds again, as in 1917 and 1918, and women returned to the fray. Gender was an active, transitive element in the movement, not a fixed point.³³

Politics was not shared as easily across religious lines. Republican women were numerous; Protestant republicans of either sex were extremely rare. Non-Catholic guerrillas were almost non-existent. It is perhaps enough to say that, in this most religious of countries, there were far more 'pagans' – as atheists or non-practising Catholics were often known – than Protestants in the IRA.³⁴ A survey of 917 prisoners convicted under the Defence of the Realm Act in 1917–19, for example, produced one declared 'agnostic' and no Protestants.³⁵ This did not make the army merely or mainly a religious or ethnic militia. It was officially a secular organization open to all Irishmen and this aspect of its formal constitution, with its implication of even-handedness, was taken seriously by a great many of its officers and men. Nor did its members, however pious, feel obliged to submit to the will of their priests or bishops, even under threat of excommunication, as in the civil war. Some early volunteers did listen to their priests and dropped out of the organization when it became violent and illegal but, almost by definition, these had not been activists.

In fact, Irish republicanism had a long history of political anti-clericalism going back to its roots in the 1790s. This must not be confused with any lack of faith. The overwhelming majority were believing and – except where clerical opposition kept them temporarily out of church – practising Catholics. And Catholicism was certainly part of republican politics and of the volunteers' self-

³² Several women had carried arms in the 1916 rising, as members of the Irish Citizen Army.

³³ See also Sarah Benton, 'Women disarmed: the militarization of politics in Ireland 1913–23', *Feminist Review*, 50 (1995), pp. 148–72.

³⁴ There were at least half a dozen IRA activists in county Cork alone who had left the Catholic Church. I know of only three Protestant guerrillas – and only a few more inactive members – in the whole of Ireland in this period.

³⁵ Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), GPB, prisoner records, cartons 3–6 (NA).

image. The symbolism and rhetoric of hunger strikes, or of IRA obituaries and funerals, are proof enough of that. The existence of a few acknowledged atheists among the guerrillas is interesting, but on an individual level only. I do not think they even formed a self-conscious subculture within the movement. It must also be emphasized that, while nearly all republicans were Catholics, and nearly all Irish Catholics were nationalists, only a minority of Catholics were revolutionaries or supporters of an armed struggle. The *ethnos* did not collectively acknowledge the army as ‘theirs’ any more than the army wholly or officially acknowledged its identity as ethnic, at least in any sectarian sense.

On the other hand, the volunteers’ corporate and essentially singular religious identity did inevitably shape their attitudes and behaviour, especially toward Protestants. Revolutionary violence in both northern and southern Ireland grew increasingly sectarian as it escalated, leading ultimately to massacres and expulsions in 1921 and 1922.³⁶ Volunteers did not generally see themselves as tribal vigilantes, and neither should historians, but the fact that their victims often did should not surprise us either.

V

Before 1917, the Irish Volunteers were neither a mass movement nor a revolutionary underground. After splitting from the Irish Party and its followers in 1914 over service in the British army, the organization – recovering and growing slowly – was largely ignored until the rising of 1916. This event changed everything. Many old members dropped out and a wave of new recruits flooded into the old units and established hundreds of new ones of their own. The movement which emerged was not only much larger but also vastly more energetic and ambitious. This transformation was symbolized by the gradual – albeit unofficial – adoption of a new title: the IRA.

No such transformation occurred in the organization’s social profile, however, Table 5 shows the occupations of men interned in Britain in May and June 1916. Here we see the revolution in prototype: the same urban bias, concentrated in the same white-collar and skilled trades. In fact, when seen in this context, the 40 per cent of members in 1917–19 who were farmers’ sons appears as an aberration in the history of the movement, a product perhaps of the mass resistance to conscription in 1917 and 1918. Once this threat to rural homesteads passed and armed conflict began, the IRA returned to its more urban, working-class roots.

If we compare the statistics for Dublin in 1916 and after, one feature that stands out is the very high proportion of skilled workers among the rebels. Their subsequent decline in importance can thus be seen as a long-term trend that began in 1917: the opposite of what was happening in the country units.

³⁶ See Peter Hart, ‘The Protestant experience of revolution in southern Ireland’, in Richard English and Graham Walker, eds., *Unionism in modern Ireland: new perspectives on politics and culture* (London, 1996).

Table 5. *Occupations of 1916 internees (%)*

Sample ...	Provincial	Census	Dublin	Census
	497	1911	872	1911
Farmer/son	29	38	—	
Farm labourer	9	22	—	
Un/semi-skilled	16		36	35
Skilled	19		40	
Shop assist/clerk	15		18	
Professional	3		1	2
Merchant/son	6		1	5
Student	0.4		1	2
Other	4		3	3

The names, addresses – and in some cases the occupations – of internees were reported in newspapers at the time, and reprinted in total in the Weekly Irish Times *Sinn Féin rebellion handbook* (Dublin, 1917). The Dublin numbers include members of the Irish Citizen Army, which was subsequently absorbed by the Volunteers.

This apparent difference might simply be due to the drop in the number of farmers' sons in the country brigades, however, rather than to the behaviour of the tradesmen themselves. Fewer of the former meant a greater proportion of rebels were the latter.

The broad continuity between the pre- and post-rising volunteers probably also extended to age. Unfortunately, internees' ages were not published. In county Cork, the median age of volunteers in 1916 was 27, two to four years older than the national average in 1917. This suggests that the flood of new members and the departure of others after 1916 did add youth – and adolescence. But this represented a moderate shift rather than a real break from the past.

These data do have a few shortcomings, which should be noted. First of all, there is no way to separate officers from men. This is less important in 1916, however, as the distinction did not matter nearly as much then. One group of 'leaders' who can be analysed are those convicted by court martial in Dublin in 1916. Out of this sample of 101 people, 27 per cent were skilled workers, 16 per cent were clerks or shop assistants, 7 per cent were merchants, 19 per cent were professionals, and another 19 per cent were labourers.³⁷ Although more firmly middle class, this group does resemble the IRA officers who followed in their wake.

Secondly, an indeterminate but small number of internees were not volunteers. The effect of this possible distortion can be checked by comparing the backgrounds of sixty-three internees from county Cork who are part of the

³⁷ Brendan MacGiolla Choille, ed., *Intelligence notes, 1913–16* (Dublin, 1966), pp. 257–70.

sample in Table 5 with a control study of 212 Cork volunteers who paraded at Easter.³⁸ As this reveals little difference between the two results, and as it can be confirmed that most of the internees were indeed volunteers, the numbers seem acceptable. Also, since provincial internment orders were based on police recommendation, the sample does tend to capture activists rather than the passive majority. Thus, the 1916 results are at least roughly comparable to the figures for later years.

VI

How did the membership of the IRA compare with that of Sinn Fein? Both organizations acquired a massive membership in a single burst of political and ideological energy following the rising and both numbered their branches in the hundreds. Unfortunately, much less data are available on party activists, and almost none for Dublin or for the rest of the country after 1919. The figures presented in Table 6 are therefore more suggestive than conclusive.

Nevertheless, this sample does suggest that the parallels ran even deeper, and that political and military republicanism appealed most strongly to the same social groups. Many of these individuals were officers of their local clubs, and as a group they closely resemble IRA officers of the same period in being generally urban, broadly middle class or aspiring to it, and in not being farmers or unskilled labourers. Such a resemblance was not entirely coincidental. In some cases Sinn Fein clubs and volunteer companies were led by the same people.

The main difference between the organizations lay in age. The average Sinn Fein militant was four or five years older than his counterpart in the Volunteers in 1917–19. There was a much larger contingent of men over 30, and almost none were under 20. In part, this reflects a natural division of labour whereby older and married men stayed out of the firing line. The same point is illustrated by the fact that female Sinn Fein activists tended to be much younger (with a median age of 23).³⁹ For women, electoral or street politics were almost their only avenues of direct participation in the revolution. Whatever the reason, this age gap between party and army reinforced the increasing tension between Sinn Fein and the IRA. When guerrillas spoke sneeringly of the ‘Sinn Fein type’, this often reflected their mistrust of anyone over 30.⁴⁰

The social character of armed republicanism can be further tested by examining the IRA outside Ireland. Despite the popularity of the cause of independence among the Irish in Britain, there were probably no more than

³⁸ A complete list of the Corkmen who paraded at Easter can be found in Florence O’Donoghue, ‘History of the Irish volunteers’ (NLI, O’Donoghue papers, MS 31,437). For further detail, see Hart, *The IRA and its enemies*.

³⁹ From a sample of twenty-six women imprisoned for political activity in 1917–19: DORA, GPB, prisoner records, cartons 3–6 (NA).

⁴⁰ See, for example, the interviews with Sean Breen and Sean Daly (UCD, O’Malley papers, P17b/83, 112).

Table 6. *Provincial Sinn Fein activists, 1917–19* (%)

Occupation		Age	
Sample...	131		195
Farmer/son	27	Under 20	1
Farm labourer	2	20–9	48
Un/semi-skilled	7	30–9	39
Skilled	19	40–9	8
Shop assist/clerk	18	50–9	2
Professional	11	60–9	1
Merchant/son	9		
Other	6	Median age	29

‘Activists’ were defined by their activity. This sample is largely made up of men who were arrested for giving speeches, canvassing, or collecting money on behalf of Sinn Fein. The main sources for this sample were: *Cork Examiner* and *Irish Times*, 1917–19; GPB records (NA); RIC reports on Sinn Fein meetings, Aug. 1918 (PRO, WO/35/64) and County Inspectors’ monthly reports. To keep the figures strictly comparable with those in other tables, and because of the scarcity of data for female activists, this sample is entirely male.

Table 7. *Volunteers in Britain, 1920–2* (%)

Sample...	Officers Men	
	26	105
Un/semi-skilled	20	27
Skilled	27	32
Shop assist/clerk	35	19
Professional	8	7
Merchant/son	8	9
Student	4	2
Other	—	4
Median age	25	23

The main source for this table is the *London Times*, 1920–3.

1,000 volunteers in England and Scotland, and no more than a few hundred who took part in operations. Most companies were not even formed until 1919 or 1920, and only became engaged in gun-running, arson, vandalism, and assassination from late 1920 onwards. It is from this period that the sample described in Table 7 is taken.

As in Ireland, these figures are largely made up of men who were arrested or imprisoned, and who can be identified as activists. The relatively small size of the sample reflects the small number of such men. Some were born in Britain.

Some were more recent arrivals. It is impossible to say exactly in what proportion, but second-generation immigrants accounted for at least a large minority of the members. British-born guerrillas did sometimes feel a sense of inferiority on this account but, if anything, this made them even more vehemently 'Irish'.⁴¹ What can be said with some confidence is that almost all were permanent residents, not travellers, seasonal migrants, or men sent over *as* guerrillas.⁴² This sets them apart from participants in more recent bombing campaigns.

In Britain, the organization was wholly urban and, like the rest of the Irish population, was heavily concentrated in the great cities of London, Liverpool, Manchester, and Glasgow.⁴³ As with the Dublin sample in Table 3 (with which it can best be compared), its membership was drawn fairly widely from the working and lower middle classes.

The only comparative general figures we have to put this sample into context come from the 1911 Scottish census. This shows Irish-born men to have been most commonly employed as manual labourers, and rarely found in offices or shops.⁴⁴ It is probably fair to conclude that, here as well, the IRA had more than its fair share of clerks and teachers. Unlike the Dublin brigades, however (but like the provincial brigades), the mainland units also had what appears to be a disproportionate number of tradesmen. Again, officers can be distinguished by their slightly more advanced age and occupational status. The IRA thus attracted youth, education, and skill on both sides of the Irish Sea.

Another way to place the rebels of 1917–23 in context is to compare them to their organizational ancestors, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). The Fenians, as they were popularly known, were found in 1858 as a secular fraternity dedicated to fighting for a republic. 'The organization' (so-called by initiates) still existed in the early 1920s as a secret society within the larger revolutionary movement. In the 1860s, it was much larger, more paramilitary, and more open. It is this earlier incarnation as an autonomous military organization – somewhat analogous to the volunteers of 1917–18 – that is significant for our purposes.

Who became rebels in Victorian Ireland? To answer this question, R. V. Comerford has assembled a list of over 1,000 Fenian 'suspects' (according to the Irish constabulary) at the height of IRB strength, between 1865 and 1870.⁴⁵ According to Comerford's figures, 48 per cent of the suspects were tradesmen, 8 per cent were shopkeepers or publicans, 9 per cent were clerks, 6 per cent were farmers or their sons, 6 per cent were general labourers, 5 per cent were

⁴¹ See Peter Hart, 'Michael Collins and the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson', *Irish Historical Studies*, 28 (1992), pp. 150–70.

⁴² Almost all of those arrested or otherwise identified as volunteers had addresses and full-time jobs in Britain.

⁴³ See David Fitzpatrick, 'The Irish in Britain', in W. E. Vaughan, ed., *A New History of Ireland*, vi (Oxford, 1996). ⁴⁴ Census of Scotland, 1911, PP, 1914, xlv (Cd. 7163), Tables A, iii.

⁴⁵ R. V. Comerford, 'Patriotism as pastime: the appeal of fenianism in the mid-1860s' *Irish Historical Studies*, 22 (1981), pp. 239–43.

Table 8. *Occupations of National Army Recruits, 1922 (%)*

Sample ...	Provincial 3,842	Census 1926	Dublin 690	Census 1926
Farmer/son	3	49	—	
Farm labourer	30	17	—	
Un/semi-skilled	38	10	70	44
Skilled	17	9	18	23
Shop assist/clerk	6	4	8	15
Professional	0.2	2	0.3	4
Merchant/son	1	4	0.3	5
Student	1	1	0.6	2
Other	3	4	3	6

MA, enlistment and discharge register, vols. 1–6. The sample includes both officers and volunteers.

agricultural labourers, 4 per cent were professionals, and 13 per cent were ‘other’ than the above. Maura Murphy’s figures for Fenian leaders and activists in Cork city in the 1860s and 1870s show similar results, with shop assistants and clerks being even more prominent.⁴⁶

Granted the differences with Irish society in the twentieth century (more urban, educated, and commercial, less artisanal), the similarities with the volunteers are noteworthy. Tradesmen and shopmen became bold Fenian men. Farmers’ sons and labourers did not. This sample does include a large number of Dubliners, but even if we calculated provincial suspects alone, the percentage engaged in agriculture would be much lower than among the next generation of volunteers. This contrast is heightened by the fact that mid-Victorian Ireland was an even more rural society. Continuities also exist at the level of individual trades, as carpenters, masons, shoemakers and drapers’ assistants were prominent in both periods. These men were also close in average age to IRA members: the mean age of another sample of 746 IRB suspects collected by Comerford was 27.

Finally, it is useful to compare the volunteers with their enemies in the civil war: the men of the National Army. Joining this force in 1922 was an entirely different undertaking from joining the IRA. It was an army with a functioning state behind it. It was disciplined, full time, and paid wages. Its soldiers lived in barracks or billets, often far from home. This new army drew new recruits, most of whom had not previously been volunteers.

The first noteworthy feature of Free State forces – as sampled in Table 8 – is the near-complete absence of farmers’ sons. In this respect, National Army

⁴⁶ Maura J. B. Murphy, ‘The role of organized labour in the political and economic life of Cork city 1820–1899’ (Ph.D. thesis, Leicester, 1979).

recruiters did no better than their British predecessors.⁴⁷ The other outstanding characteristic of the ‘Staters’ was how proletarian they were. More than two-thirds had been labourers of one sort or another, on farms, docks, roads, or unemployed. Again, this fits the image and social background of the bulk of Irish recruits for the British army, a comparison anti-treaty republicans were quick to make.

Compounding this lowly social status, the novice soldiers were young (their median age was 24 and many were under 20) and unmarried (95 per cent).⁴⁸ Moreover, 1922 also brought an economic slump, so work was scarce and wages were low. For such men, joining the army meant giving up little or nothing and gaining a year or two of steady employment – and possibly even respectability. Nor was it nearly as dangerous as joining the RIC in 1921, let alone the British army in 1914 or 1915. Whatever the reasons, the result was that the two forces facing each other in 1922–3 possessed very distinct social as well as political identities.

VII

The Times correspondent present at the collapse of the Easter rising reported that there were essentially two kinds of rebel. ‘Many... were unmistakably of the rabble class to be found in every large town’, but there was also a large complement of ‘intellectuals’, easily identifiable as ‘young men with high foreheads and thin lips’. It was also obvious to him that the latter had led – or misled – the former into revolt and that ‘heavy is the responsibility of those who poisoned such men’s minds’.⁴⁹ Six years later, General Cyril Prescott-Decie, a former Irish police commissioner, was still able to reduce ‘IRA types’ to more or less the same two categories: ‘the one the burly ruffian type; the other a moral and physical degenerate... these were the men with whom the Black and Tans had to deal’.⁵⁰

These writers shared with their contemporaries the assumption that the volunteers fell into ‘types’ who shared a distinct physical, as well as a social, anatomy: recognizable as well as categorizable. That there was such a thing as an IRA type was as clear to friends as to foes. With political sympathy, however, came the rival image of a revolutionary ‘new man’: ‘determined, steady, with a drilled uprightness of bearing... a Crusader of modern days’.⁵¹

Thin lips and fanatic brows aside, can a volunteer typology be assembled from the data presented here? Catholic almost without exception, very likely unmarried and unpropertied, and probably under 30. Beyond that, the characteristics of the gunman become less predictable. Nevertheless, certain collective tendencies do stand out clearly enough to identify a prominent – if

⁴⁷ See Martin Staunton, ‘The Royal Munster Fusiliers in the Great War, 1914–19’ (M.A. thesis, University College Dublin, 1986), pp. 12–20, and Fitzpatrick, ‘The logic of collective sacrifice’, pp. 1017–30.

⁴⁸ From a sample of 2,106 men taken from the Army Census, Nov. 1922 (MA, Army Census, L/S/1).

⁴⁹ *Times*, 3 May 1916.

⁵⁰ *Times*, 18 July 1922.

⁵¹ Mrs William O’Brien, *In Mallow* (London, 1920), pp. 65, 68.

not dominant – IRA ‘type’: urban, educated, skilled (and thus at least potentially socially mobile), and more or less at the beginning of his career. Such men were at the forefront of the struggle everywhere: in Dublin and all four provinces, in Britain, and in Sinn Féin as well. What was it that made republican activism so appealing to them? Can the social composition of the IRA tell us something about its motivational composition as well?

Ideology offers one explanation. Perhaps prior exposure to cultural nationalism helped turn young men into guerrillas? Theirs was the first generation to have the Irish language taught widely in schools. This hypothesis is reinforced by the strong statistical correlation between the number of young male Irish speakers, or the proportion of national schools teaching Irish in a county or city, and its level of IRA activity.⁵² There is an additional occupational congruence between the two movements. Turn-of-the-century observers often noted the prominent role played by shop assistants, clerks, and teachers in the Gaelic League just as others would a decade later with the IRA.⁵³ This is confirmed by a study of towns in county Cork, whose census records reveal that these occupations accounted for a majority of Irish-speaking young men in 1911. On the other hand, there is no statistical relationship between IRA violence and the presence of shop assistants or clerks in an area.⁵⁴ Local research also shows that many volunteers neither spoke Irish nor belonged to any cultural or political organization before joining. Finally, if we accept this connection, the question still remains: why did men with these jobs become language enthusiasts in the first place?

More generally, and in partial answer to the last two points, we might argue for the primacy of environment and organizational resources in producing activists of any sort. In towns, exposure to ideas, propaganda, and organizations would have been more continuous and intense than in the country. Newspapers, political literature, public meetings, and club rooms were all more immediately available. Working in offices, shops, or workshops meant constant contact with fellow workers, customers, and neighbours. Many farms, on the other hand, were comparatively isolated and removed from such everyday contacts. Towns and cities clearly offered greater organizational opportunities – to the language movement as well as to the IRA. Thus, even if one was not a member of any political or cultural group before 1916, one probably knew someone who was.

Why did urban labourers not respond in the same way? Most likely because, while they had the same potential exposure and access, they lacked the necessary personal resources. Republicanism (and Gaelicism) was consumed as well as believed. Newspapers, books, and political paraphernalia had to be

⁵² See Hart, ‘The geography of revolution’, pp. 142–76.

⁵³ See Tom Garvin, *Nationalist revolutionaries in Ireland, 1858–1928* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 86–90, and John Hutchinson, *The dynamics of cultural nationalism: the Gaelic revival and the creation of the Irish nation state* (London, 1987), pp. 179, 287.

⁵⁴ Hart, ‘The geography of revolution’, pp. 162, 168–70.

bought and read, membership dues had to be paid, speeches had to be made. Greater disposable incomes and education made salaried workers better political consumers and entrepreneurs, especially after 1916, when republicanism was a new and improved product.

This did not necessarily mean that there was a deficiency of patriotism or republicanism in the countryside. Irish farms were even less likely than urban families to send their sons to fight in the British or National Armies. Nor were countrymen any less supportive of Sinn Fein than townsmen when it came to votes or party membership.⁵⁵ It might be argued that the rural deficit which appears in the provincial membership figures (for both the IRA and Sinn Fein) simply reflects the nature of the sources. Towns were better garrisoned, policed, and reported upon, so urban rebels were more likely to show up in arrest and prison records and newspaper accounts. By this reckoning, the drop in the percentage of countrymen in the samples after 1919 might be accounted for by the withdrawal of the RIC from most of their rural barracks. This logic cannot explain the 1916 figures, however, and it breaks down again in 1922–3, when there were even fewer police in the countryside, yet the proportion of farmers and farm labourers in the provincial IRA actually rose slightly.

There may be an additional explanation for urban–rural differences based on confrontation and risk. Sinn Fein and the Volunteers might have been better organized and supported most intensely in towns, but so were their opponents, whether the home rule party machine, ex-soldiers, unionists, or the police. The resulting polarization, experienced through arguments, street fighting, intimidation, arrests, raids, and surveillance, may have helped to radicalize urban republicans to a far greater extent than their country comrades. It may also have goaded them into greater levels of activism by forcing them out of their homes and jobs under the threat of prison or death. Farmers' sons, because of where they lived and who their neighbours were, were less likely to face such a crisis.

Evidence for this theory can be found in the exceptionally detailed North Cork Brigade company records for 1921. These show that urban volunteers had more than twice the chance of being arrested as their rural comrades, and were more than twice as likely to be 'on the run'. They were also 60 per cent more 'active'.⁵⁶ Which came first – the arrests or the activism – is debatable but what is clear is that increased risk and increased militancy went hand in hand.

These explanations of the IRA's urban bias depend on a comparison between the gunmen and the general population. If we compare them to the members of other organizations, though, the question becomes, not why there were so few rural volunteers but, rather, why there were so many. By the standard of the British and Irish regular armies, or the Fenians of the 1860s, the guerrillas actually did rather well in attracting rural recruits. Among their

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 166–8.

⁵⁶ North Cork Brigade company returns, 1921 (NLI, O'Donoghue papers, MS 31,223).

allies or enemies, only the RIC – which took 60 per cent of its men from farming families – did better.⁵⁷

Part of the answer may lie in the social circumstances of farm life. Family farms needed their sons' labour, so leaving to fight in Europe would often have been economically untenable. Joining the IRA did not mean leaving home, though, and even offered the hope of preventing conscription. On the other hand, as violence escalated after 1918, so did the level of commitment and risk required of active volunteers, and the likelihood of going on the run or to prison. The rising costs of revolution might therefore also account for the departure of so many farmers' sons after 1919. The farm exercised a pull on sons to stay, and politically hostile towns pushed republicans into greater activity, both to avoid risk. The same factors help explain why Sinn Féin's paper membership and electoral support was predominantly rural while its activists tended to come from urban backgrounds.

VIII

Explanations for why shop assistants, skilled workers, or townsmen in general were more likely to be revolutionaries do not tell us why particular individuals were. With the exception of a few long-time republicans, there was little or nothing to distinguish future guerrillas from their peers before they joined the movement. Who they were was not the sum of their vital statistics, however. Men did not simply join or participate as individuals, at a certain age, or as shoemakers or teachers. They joined in groups, with relatives or friends, and it was these relationships, as much as any common social background, that determined who became members and activists.

The informal networks that bound Volunteer units together can be seen from the beginning, in the Easter rising. Using official reports, we can map the names and addresses of 914 captured or surrendered Dublin rebels deported to Britain between 30 April and 6 May.⁵⁸ The results show that 17 per cent of these men had the same last name and lived at the same address as at least one other volunteer. Presumably, the great majority belonged to the same family. Another 10 per cent with different names had shared a home with one or more fellow internees, and an additional 8 per cent lived adjacent to one or more rebels. In other words, more than a third of the sample can be grouped into definite family and residential clusters. And this no doubt understates the case. After all, many brothers and cousins lived apart but still volunteered together.

The same pattern is even more strongly evident in Cork city in the years after 1916. Here, 22 per cent of a sample of 588 guerrillas were brothers living together. Another 9 per cent shared an address, and 17 per cent lived next door to another volunteer. So nearly half of the organization in Cork for whom names and exact addresses are known were family or next-door neighbours.

Nor was this clustering a peculiarly urban phenomenon. We might expect to

⁵⁷ Brian Griffin, 'The Irish police, 1836–1914' (Ph.D. thesis, Loyola University of Chicago, 1991), p. 855.

⁵⁸ See note on sources for table 5.

find it to be even more prevalent in a small town or a country parish. And, indeed, a close examination of the Behagh company in West Cork reveals that, from 1915 to 1923, more than half of the members had at least one brother in the unit. Most of the men, and particularly the officers, were also immediate neighbours.⁵⁹ Many other such examples can be found. The pivotal Carnacross company in Meath, for one, ‘was almost a family affair with seven Farrelly brothers, five Dunne brothers, another family of four Dunes, the Lynchs, the Dalys and two Tevlins making up most of the company’.⁶⁰ Nearly every county and city had its leading families: the Brennans and Barretts in Clare, the Sweeneys and O’Donnells in Donegal, the Hannigans and Manahans in Limerick, the Hales in West Cork, the Kerrs in Liverpool. Similar nuclei can be found in shops, offices, mills, and factories. Equally strong networks, less measurable but just as identifiable, were built around school and football or hurling team-mates. In these contexts, within families and neighbourhoods, being one of ‘the boys’ was at least as important as occupation or age.

IX

If we return to Yeats’s opening allusion in ‘Easter 1916’, to Volunteer leaders working behind counters and desks, we can recognize it as a fair social assessment. The fact that they inspired ‘a mocking tale or a gibe / to please a companion / around the fire at the club’ also reflects the condescension or even contempt accompanying such descriptions of rebel ‘types’. Of course, such distinctions only mattered so long as motley was still worn. With rebellion came the birth of a terrible beauty and, for the rebels, a rebirth as heroes and martyrs. The question of who they were was now answered by what they had done for their cause.

The point is one that needs to be made for the whole period, and for the IRA as a whole. We cannot answer the question only by cataloguing pre-revolutionary traits. The guerrillas’ individual and collective identities were changed by the fact of their participation. The new volunteers who joined after 1916 often spoke of their involvement in almost mystical terms, and the act of joining as a kind of conversion experience. Revolution became their vocation. The movement forged new bonds and attitudes. Urban volunteers went on the run and on active service in the country. Provincial republicans went to Dublin or London. Thousands of men spent months or years in prison or in detention camps. For activists, their personal horizons both expanded with travel and new contacts, and contracted as the cause took over their lives. For the fighting men, what counted most was not social status but commitment and contribution: what one did, not where one stood on the social ladder. In this mobile, uncertain, politically charged, generally egalitarian new world, fellow

⁵⁹ For a map and further details of the company, see Peter Hart, ‘Class, community and the Irish Republican Army in Cork, 1917–1923’, in Patrick O’Flanagan and Cornelius Buttimer, eds., *Cork: history and society* (Cork, 1993), pp. 975–6.

⁶⁰ Oliver Coogan, *Politics and war in Meath 1913–23* (Dublin, 1983), p. 191.

revolutionaries became their primary reference group. For some, the identification with the comrades, the republic, with Ireland, was near-total.

Such conviction crossed all social boundaries. Nevertheless, while class, geography, religion, and family were not the only determinants of membership and activism, they were all highly influential. Nor did the 'new men' of the republic simply abandon old social attitudes. If anything, republicanism carried with it a heightened sense of respectability and community. Which brings us back to the issue of what IRA members did or, more specifically, who they did it to. Who, among their neighbours and fellow countrymen, became their victims? The guerrillas too saw their enemies as 'types': 'corner boy' ex-servicemen, 'black' orangemen or freemasons, dirty tramps and 'tinkers', 'fast' women. People who were perceived as falling into such categories were the most likely to be denounced as 'informers' or 'enemies of the Republic' and shot, burned out, or intimidated. Thus, while knowing who the men behind the guns were is a vital question in itself, it can also tell us a great deal about who they were aiming at.

Appendix: Table 9 *Occupations of volunteers by province, 1917–23 (%)*

Sample...	Officers			Men			Census	
	1917–19	1920–1	1922–3	1917–19	1920–1	1922–3	1911	1926
	Munster							
	510	332	150	1,019	1,525	899		
Farmer/son	29	22	21	39	28	11	36	40
Farm labourer	5	4	8	11	12	24	26	17
Un/semi-skilled	4	5	9	10	16	25		13
Skilled	21	26	28	18	20	23		10
Shop assist/clerk	20	22	19	10	13	11		9
Professional	7	7	7	1	4	1		4
Merchant/son	10	12	4	6	5	1		4
Student	0.4	0.3	—	1	1	0.4		1
Other	3	4	3	2	2	3		2
Connaught ^a								
	57	38		246	126	97		
Farmer/son	38	42		52	39	35	67	74
Farm labourer	2	4		6	12	11	15	7
Un/semi-skilled	2	3		4	8	14		4
Skilled	17	3		12	12	23		5
Shop assist/clerk	13	6		21	17	10		3
Professional	20	29		1	2	1		2
Merchant/son	7	13		4	5	2		2
Student	2	—		0.5	5	—		0.4
Other	—	—		0.5	1	3		1

Appendix: Table 9 *Cont.*

	Officers			Men			Census	
	1917-19	1920-1	1922-3	1917-19	1920-1	1922-3	1911	1926
	Leinster ^{a,b}							
Sample...	75	72		132	216	93		
Farmer/son	17	23		22	32	10	29	35
Farm labourer	3	7		18	13	24	29	23
Un/semi-skilled	3	5		12	9	24		12
Skilled	32	23		12	16	17		13
Shop assist/clerk	15	19		15	18	22		5
Professional	13	15		3	3	—		2
Merchant/son	12	6		18	6	—		3
Student	1	—		—	—	1		
Other	4	4		1	2	3		
	Ulster ^{a,c}							
Sample...	40	19		42	118			
Farmer/son	5	32		12	28		35	33
Farm labourer	8	—		9	13		19	8
Un/semi-skilled	10	5		12	19			21
Skilled	40	16		29	18			20
Shop assist/clerk	18	16		18	18			7
Professional	15	21		3	—			2
Merchant/son	5	5		18	6			5
Student	—	5		—	—			0.2
Other	—	—		—	—			3

^a The samples for Connaught, Leinster, and Ulster do not include columns for officers in 1922-3 because the sources did not state ranks.

^b The sample for Leinster excludes the Dublin district.

^c The census data for Ulster include Protestants, who dominated the professions and skilled trades. As the IRA drew exclusively on the Catholic population, this means that these occupational groups were even more over-represented in the IRA than the above figures suggest.