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ARTICLE

The War that Didn't Happen: Waiting for Ambushes in the Irish War of Independence

Máirtín Seán Ó Catháin

School of Humanities, Language & Global Studies, University of Central Lancashire, Preston PR1 2HE, United Kingdom
mso-cathain@uclan.ac.uk

There is a widely held perception that the Anglo-Irish War or War of Independence was a hard-fought series of guerrilla war engagements punctuated by larger and often spectacular events in Cork, Dublin and elsewhere. However, an examination of the conflict from the perspective of a search for an alternative war, where little if anything occurred, can yield interesting and counter-intuitive results. This is exactly what this article sets out to do in order to demonstrate the often rich potential in the quest for nothing in particular, but primarily to establish that in every conflict of this type, another war often takes place, which shows itself to be largely ineffectual and futile though ultimately quite rewarding in its own way.

The issue of how, and sometimes if, the Irish War of Independence, 1919–21, should be commemorated has been a recurring theme of the Irish government's 'Decade of Centenaries'. The mooted commemoration or act of remembrance for the Royal Irish Constabulary which erupted into argument and was eventually postponed in January 2020 was seen as the first significant controversy about the manner and extent of public remembrance.[1] Missing, however, from this discussion of commemorating the action-packed years of Ireland's struggle for independence has been some consideration of how to remember what didn't happen. Perhaps, indeed, a useful antidote, at least to the cloying reverence for the dead generations by politicians, would be to hold a commemorative event at a lonely crossroads or deserted hillside where nothing in particular took place. The rationale here, of course, is that such an event would maybe more accurately reflect the reality that, as in many conflicts of its type, the Tan War saw more plans fall through than take place. Even a cursory glance at the Bureau of Military History (BMH) witness statements provides ample evidence for lonely vigils in empty fields and urban ambushes where no-one had the decency to turn up and be shot. There is a presence as well as an absence in such moments. This article will therefore attempt to establish the ubiquity of nothingness during the Anglo-Irish War, drawing in particular on the memories of Irish Volunteers contained in the BMH statements aided by the equally valuable Military Service Pensions materials and supplemented by the published memoirs of leading IRA figures. However, it is not merely an argument about cancelled engagements and frustrated plans, or even the predominance of failed schemes over actual attacks. The absurdity of war in general is illuminated by its practice as much as the so-called 'rules of engagement', and a key aim of this piece is to highlight the vibrancy of futility. The contingency at the heart of planned operations and actual success hinges repeatedly on a potentially vast array of small factors to be explored in this paper, many of which show the good potential there is for the historian in these futile moments.

Historians as a rule tend to favour the tangible rather than the intangible in their research. Though counter-factual or 'virtual' history has always enjoyed popular sales and entertained university seminar classes from time to time, it remains the case that history tends to be a discipline focused on what

[1] Ronan McGreevy, 'Where to Now after the Debacle over the RIC/DMP Commemoration?', *Irish Times*, 11 Jan. 2020.

actually happened rather than what might have happened, still less on what didn't take place at all.[2] There is, however, much to say about nothing. Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre all derived a great deal from nothingness and its ability to inform us about who we are as well as the nature of being. Hegel's conception, of course, merely re-articulated themes and ideas explored in classical Greek philosophy, but he formulated the notion of being and non-being as essentially the same thing, though only the latter is contingent on the former and not the reverse. With Heidegger's *Dasein*, there are the beginnings of a revolt against the Hegelian view and a palpable sense of angst about nothingness. It is, however, in Sartre that a fuller sense of the symmetry between being and nothingness is brought together, devoid of the anxiety vested in it by Heidegger. As Gary Cox writes, 'like Hegel, Sartre holds that non-being – as the negation of being – is ontologically dependent on being. But unlike Hegel, he does not hold that being is ontologically dependent on non-being. For Sartre, non-being simply *discloses* being'.[3]

This idea of nothingness needing being in order to find something that can be negated stands therefore in contradistinction to being, which isn't dependent on anything else. Sartre, however, adds that a human consciousness is required in order to negate being and gives the famous example of arriving at a café to meet Pierre, who is not there, inasmuch as his absence is a real perceived presence.[4] It is, however, in his work on the imagination that Sartre makes the claim that its chief characteristic is marked by the mind's ability to imagine that which is not.[5] Nevertheless, Sartre's negative ontology has had little or no impact on historical method. Andrew Dobson felt he was ultimately focused on supporting a broadly Marxist interpretation whatever his misgivings about the 'impossibility' of history.[6] More recently, Thomas Flynn in examining *Notebooks for an Ethics* for the core of Sartre's writings on history found him to be a critic of historical materialism. Moreover, Flynn argues:

> The *Notebooks*, itself an ambiguous work due to its posthumous publication and aphoristic style, carries as its chief message for a philosophy of history the multi-faceted *ambiguity* of the historical fact. This derives primarily from the inherent otherness of the fact as historical (a gloss on Sartre's remark in *Being and Nothingness* that the dead are prey to the living), from the hazards of being-in-itself, and from the nonself coincidence that grounds individual freedom.[7]

The set-piece of the Anglo-Irish War was undoubtedly the ambush. Partly, this is because it is still seen and thought of as the iconic operation of the conflict, even though the ambush phase was only a relatively short one, lasting perhaps from the closing months of 1920 to the July Truce of 1921 which brought the war to its conclusion. The ambush is also the best place to find nothing because of the wait that preceded even successful engagements and is therefore suffused with anticipation and expectation that was more often than not unfulfilled. This is a phenomenon that has already been partly recognised by Townshend, Augusteijn, Fitzpatrick, Hart and others.[8] W. H. Kautt, however, is the

[2] Catherine Gallagher, *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counter-Factual Imagination in History and Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 1–15.

[3] Gary Cox, *Sartre: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), 4–5.

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), 33–5.

[5] Philip Thady and Howard Read, *Introducing Sartre* (London: Icon, 2012), 29; Lior Levy, 'Ways of Imagining: a New Interpretation of Sartre's Notion of Imagination', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 59, 2 (Apr. 2019), 134. Levy says Sartre argues that 'unlike perceiving, which reveals an existing world, imagining grasps nothing'.

[6] Andrew Dobson, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Politics of Reason: A Theory of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 180.

[7] Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault and Historical Reason, Vol. 1: Towards an Existential Theory of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 65.

[8] Charles Townshend, *The British Campaign in Ireland, 1919–21* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 114; Joost Augusteijn, 'Military Conflict in the War of Independence', in John Crowley, Dónal Ó Drisceoil and Mike Murphy, eds., *Atlas of the Irish Revolution* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 348 and 352; David Fitzpatrick, 'The Geography of Irish Nationalism, 1910–1921', *Past and Present*, 78 (Feb. 1978), 115; Peter Hart, 'The Geography of Revolution in Ireland, 1917–1923', *Past and Present*, 155 (May 1997), 158.

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only person to make the study of ambushes during the Anglo-Irish War a specialist and sustained focus. Written within the confines of a military history approach derived from his position as a serving member of the US military, Kautt's work is predictably technical, but its banality nevertheless reveals the essential weaknesses of guerrilla warfare in terms of the ratio of planned to actual attacks.[9] In fairness, Kautt is but one in a long tradition of the manual-writing approach to guerrilla warfare that characterises the genre. Whether in the hands of Clausewitz, Mazzini, Blanqui or Lenin prior to events in Ireland or afterwards, in the words of Mao and Guevara, the subject of guerrilla war often elicits a turgid technical prose of the kind regularly featured in the missives *An t-Óglach*, the Irish Volunteer journal, carried in these years. Instructions written for idealised scenarios rarely accord with actual conditions; however, some of these works acknowledge the necessity of patience and commitment from guerrilla bands.[10] Alternatively, Hobsbawm's work on banditry focuses instead on opportunism in tactics and tends to view violence as incidental rather than targeted or wanton.[11] This article is not, though, an essay in retrospective best practice or an attempt to identify and isolate the strengths and weaknesses of the classic ambush. Its main concern is that 'other' war between 1919 and 1921, where nothing much occurred in settings where just the opposite was expected.

The first method needed to test the basic hypothesis that the Anglo-Irish War was equally characterised by nothingness as by the events known, recorded and remembered is to survey the Bureau of Military History witness statements. Organised by the Department for Defence, the statements were partial, linked to pension applications and naturally retrospective accounts collected as oral testimonies between 1947 and 1957. This will be done with three varied approaches for selecting the statements: random, proportional and intensity-based. The first, employing a random technique based on how someone might first use the BMH collection searching for an individual, will look at people with the surname Kelly, one of the most common surnames across every county in Ireland, then and now. The second will sample 50 per cent of all statements for each province, and the third, merging with the second to an extent, will take from the Brigade Activity Reports (BAR), set forth in the Military Service Pensions collection, an examination of the most and least intense areas. This will be based on the 'key operations' section of the BAR (led by a map of the main engagements according to their frequency in pension applications) and will then select individuals involved in these major events for discussion. Such a methodology is certainly open to charges of being as partial as the statements themselves, but it is intended as a way of engaging with the source material in a creative and expansive manner as well as one directed by the individual, the collective, and the dramatic experience.

Most people's interaction with the BMH witness statements is likely to come through a search for a name or a place. In the absence of specific user statistics, it's worthwhile randomising a search on the basis of surname. There are thirteen Kellys in the witness statements, comprising seven officers and six men from counties Donegal, Dublin, Cork, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway, Newry and Tyrone. Some refer to the pre-1919 period, and statements like this have generally been excluded from the research unless they reflect on later events. There are also statements, like that of Thomas Kelly of Carrigeen, Ballymurray, Co. Roscommon, arrested at the start of 1921, which, as a result, do not convey experiences of ambushes and attacks beyond the initial skirmishes of 1919–20.[12] In addition, some Volunteers, like fellow Roscommon man John Kelly, were injured and unable to participate, with

[9] W. H. Kautt, *Ambushes and Armour: The Irish Revolution, 1919–21* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010).

[10] Walter Laqueur, *The Guerilla Reader: A Historical Anthology* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1977), 29–36, 46–8, 58–61, 66–82, 153–8 and 172–8; *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel Griffith (London: Cassell, 1962), 95–104; Ernesto 'Ché' Guevara, *Guerilla Warfare* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1998), 60, 63 and 113; *An t-Óglach*, 31 Dec. and 15 Jan. 1918, Vol. 1, No. 12, 1919, 2–4, 15 Jan. 1920, 1–2, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/an-toglach-magazine-1918–1933 (accessed 31 Mar. 2019).

[11] Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Abacus, 2007), 51–3.

[12] Military Archives of Ireland (MAI), Bureau of Military History (BMH), WS.701, statement of Thomas Kelly, 1–11, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0701.pdf (accessed 2 Oct. 2019).

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their statements centring around their injuries and recuperation.[13] Others, like Michael Kelly of Loughrea, Co. Galway, are not written by Volunteers but sympathisers or assorted individuals who can't provide insider accounts or dwell on specific incidents or moments.[14] Of much more use is a statement like that of P. J. Kelly of Westport, Co. Mayo, and his involvement in the activities of the Louisburgh Battalion, overseen by the energetic brigade commander Michael Kilroy. After lying in wait on two occasions at ambush positions, Kelly and his men 'failed to make contact as the police were aware of armed men in the district, and consequently, did not show out'.[15] Subsequent ambush positions directed at Black and Tan patrols also proved fruitless and initial 'contact' was largely accidental. Success for the Louisburgh men came eventually with the Carrowkennedy ambush on 2 June 1921, though soon after, at an ambush position outside Crimlin village awaiting a British army patrol, 'we took up positions but when they came within a quarter of a mile from us they turned about and went back towards Crimlin'.[16] Weeks of moving across the countryside, dispersing and re-forming to evade capture, were equally punctuated by endless *Godot*-like waiting in mountainy fields outside Castlebar, one of which Kelly recalled as 'the longest day in my life'.[17]

In the vastly different terrain and context of rural County Tyrone in the north of Ireland, William J. Kelly of Dungannon recounted similar experiences of repeated abandoned rendezvous with the enemy in amongst a variety of actions, concluding 'the county should have done better than it did during the Tan War'.[18] The same could not be said for the Dublin Brigade, but even Patrick Kelly of Chamber Street and the 1st Battalion recollected repeated liaisons with fellow Volunteers to intercept a Dublin Castle photographer who failed to turn up. More carefully planned ambushes related by Kelly resulted in similar frustration, though when a lonesome soldier in rubber-soled shoes presented himself to Kelly and his waiting comrades, his 'pally' manner allowed him to pass by unmolested.[19] There's more than a hint of the absurd here and the ridiculousness of killing the right people, in the right moment, at the right place. Not many soldiers escaped death by the silence of their shoes and the manner of their speech, but odd decisions about when to shoot and when to hold fire are not at all uncommon.

Some idea, however, of the universality of nothingness in the Anglo-Irish War can only be conveyed by a proportional sampling of the witness statements. As with the random sampling, this is done fully cognisant of the source's limitations as explored by Morrison, McGarry, Ferriter, Gkotzaridis, Ó Tuathaigh and others. Partial, in both senses of the word, the witness statements can only be said to convey slices of the revolutionary past and are mired in all the difficulties as well as absorbent of all the possibilities constrained and unleashed by memory.[20]

[13] MAI, BMH, WS.720, statement of John Kelly, 1–4, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0720.pdf (accessed 22 Feb. 2019).

[14] MAI, BMH, WS.1126, statement of Michael Kelly, 1–3, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1564.pdf (accessed 2 Oct. 2019).

[15] MAI, BMH, WS.1735, statement of P.J. Kelly, 17, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1735.pdf (accessed 2 Oct. 2019).

[16] MAI, BMH, WS.1735, statement of P.J. Kelly, 23, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1735.pdf (accessed 2 Oct. 2019).

[17] MAI, BMH, WS.1735, statement of P.J. Kelly, 24, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1735.pdf (accessed 2 Oct. 2019).

[18] MAI, BMH, WS.893, statement of William J. Kelly, 19–24, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0893.pdf (accessed 22 Feb. 2019).

[19] MAI, BMH, WS.781, statement of Patrick Kelly, 63 and 69–70, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0781.pdf (accessed 22 Feb. 2019).

[20] Eve Morrison, 'Bureau of Military History witness statements as sources for the Irish Revolution', https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Bureau_of_Military_witness_statements-as_sources-for_the_Irish-Revolution.pdf (accessed 25 Jan. 2019); Fearghal McGarry, 'Too Many Histories: The Bureau of Military History and Easter, 1916', *History Ireland*, 19, 6 (Nov–Dec. 2011), 26–9; Diarmaid Ferriter, 'In Such Deadly Earnest', *Dublin Review*, 12 (Autumn 2003), 5–15; Evi Gkotzaridis, 'Revisionist Historians and the Modern Irish State: The Conflict between the Advisory Committee and the Bureau of Military History, 1947–66', *Irish Historical Studies*, 35, 137 (May 2006), 99–116; and Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, 'The Irish Revolutionary Decade, 1913–23: Voices, Narratives and

Table 1. Statements by province

Place	Number	Percentage	Proportion
Ulster	126	7.4	63
Munster	673	39.8	336
Leinster	688	40.7	344
Connacht	150	8.8	75
Elsewhere	50	2.9	25

Source: MAI, BMH witness statements, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921.

An obvious practical difficulty of this type of research is the application of proportionality to any quantitative examination of the witness statements. The statements total 1,773 testimonies, and the extraction of 50 per cent for each province revealed 1,687 accessible statements (some are listed online but unavailable), though fifty, or about 2.9 per cent, of these relate to activities outside of Ireland. Some statements also relate, ironically perhaps, as has been noted, to non-active personnel, mainly civilian witnesses, but these have been included in a few instances where they provided evidence for non-events. In every case, the statements have been read in full to find evidence for nothing taking place at places and times where the opposite was anticipated. Table 1 shows where these statements relate to, how many there are, both numerically and in percentage terms, and finally, what proportion they make up of the statements overall.

Excluding 'elsewhere' for no other rationale than the absence of attempts at guerrilla warfare, there were a total of 818 from all the above statements to survey for nothing.[21] The definition employed was of an action, normally an ambush, that was abandoned through a failure to make 'contact' with the enemy. Sometimes the 'ambush' may simply have been an attempt to kill or capture an individual or individuals at a specific place and time. Events abandoned because of an accidental discharge or some other means by which a position was knowingly given away were not included in the tallies as something extraneous had evidently happened to null and void the qualification for nullity otherwise. Similarly, events where contact was somehow made but, for one reason or another, fire failed to be exchanged, were also excluded. However, attacks that may have successfully come off in the same locale at another date if not at the one chosen were included.

Perhaps because the number of statements tally with the intensity of particular provinces and counties, Tables 1 through 5, which are based on the extracted 827, reinforce the national picture of activism now long-established in the literature. If we look, for example, at Table 2, the figures for Cork stand out, suggesting that areas with the most activity were also the same areas with, if not the most non-activity, then the highest abortive activity rate.

Intuitively, it would seem that non-events took place in direct if inverse proportion to actual events and incredibly successful units; for example, Tom Barry's Third (West) Cork Brigade saw more than their fair share of retreats from unproductive or unfulfilled encounters with soldiers, policemen and informers. Therefore, IRA units with the most experience were, ironically, often those with the greater experience of failure. Such were the fortunes if not the fruits of war, and even in the less dramatic counties of Connacht, patterns of nothingness seem remarkably similar to those in Munster. It also seems to be the case that time and experience, while improving the tactical efficiency of some units

Context', in Ciara Boylan, Sarah-Anne Buckley and Pat Dolan, eds., *Family Histories of the Irish Revolution* (Dublin: Open Air, 2018), 23–36.

[21] Some 827 statements were included in the end to provide a balance between town and country overall and the 1926 census data was used to identify the urban and rural districts. These were then entered into the BMH search facility to find statements relating to these areas; see Central Statistics Office, Census Volumes, Census 1926, Vol. 1, section 11, Population, area and valuation of each district electoral divisions, urban district and rural district, https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/census1926results/volume1/C_1926_V1_T11.pdf (accessed 17 Apr. 2020) and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), 1926 Census General Report, https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/1926-census-general-report.pdf (accessed 28 Apr. 2020).

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Table 2. Figures for non-events: Munster (56 statements)

County	Number	Percentage
Clare	36	64.2
Cork	42	75
Kerry	35	62.5
Limerick	35	62.5
Tipperary	42	75
Waterford	37	66.07
TOTAL	227	67.56

Source: MAI, BMH witness statements, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921.

Table 3. Figures for non-events: Connacht (15 statements*)

County	Number	Percentage
Galway	18	90
Leitrim	11	73.3
Mayo	9	60
Roscommon	9	60
Sligo	8	53.3
TOTAL	55	68.75

Source: MAI, BMH witness statements, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921.
*Twenty statements were taken for Galway to get an even balance between the city and county towns and the countryside.

overall across the country, did not negate the continued experience of the failed encounter. This may partly be accounted for by a greater unwillingness of the government forces to sally out into hostile territory, but the approach of the truce saw as many abortive ambush events as the early days of the conflict.

As Table 3 indicates, Galway seems incredibly high, at some 90 per cent of the witness statements for half the county showing evidence for non-attacks. These, of course, were not unsuccessful in the classic definition of failed attempts, though that they failed in their objective can hardly be doubted. As in Leinster, the presence of large enemy garrisons may have had an impact on effectiveness, but the figures remain striking. Perhaps what we are seeing here in part is merely an attempt in the statements to convey against the grain of a popular idea about the north-west's inability to rival the south-west that a lack of decisive victories could be off-set by the impression of a panoply of activity and planning even when neither worked. That is borne out in the figures for Ulster, which range from a low of just 14 per cent for Derry, a large garrison town that did not witness a great many attacks on crown forces generally during the war, to a high of 71 per cent for the widely different counties of Antrim and Cavan. However, the sample sizes necessarily invite great caution for the Ulster figures (given in Table 4), with only the overall provincial total perhaps averaging out the non-event more accurately. This was because Ulster, with large Protestant and unionist communities, was an area noted for its differential experience of the Anglo-Irish War, due to its demography and political structures as well as its physical terrain and the influence of leaders in Dublin all having an impact on the conduct and character of conflict there. Decisions about when and when not to attack perhaps had to consider a wider number of factors than in other parts of the country. However, its provincial total compares favourably with that of the capital, which as the centre of the storm, also produced around 50 per cent of nothing.

Whereas it was relatively easy to assemble twenty-nine statements from Dublin, as shown in Table 5, getting a rough balance across the various command areas in the city and county, to acquire a similar number from Carlow and Louth was almost impossible and so meant drawing on those from neighbouring counties as much as possible whilst avoiding double-counting. This did, however, have

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Table 4. Figures for non-events: Ulster (7 statements)

County	Number	Percentage
Cavan	5	71.4
Donegal	2	28.5
Monaghan	4	57.1
Antrim	5	71.4
Down	3	42.8
Tyrone	2	28.5
Armagh	3	42.8
Fermanagh	4	57.1
Derry	1	14.2
TOTAL	29	46.03

Source: MAI, BMH witness statements, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921.

Table 5. Figures for non-events: Leinster (29 statements)

County	Number	Percentage
Carlow	16	55.1
Dublin	15	51.7
Kildare	15	51.7
Laois	19	65.5
Longford	24	82.7
Kilkenny	21	72.4
Louth	16	55.1
Meath	20	68.9
Offaly	19	65.5
Westmeath	20	68.9
Wexford	12	41.3
Wicklow	14	48.2
TOTAL	211	60.6

Source: MAI, BMH witness statements, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921.

the effect of managing to sample more than the 50 per cent and may represent a clearer picture of things that failed to happen.

In all, the Bureau of Military History witness statements surveyed (827) reveal 522 non-events, that is an indice of just over 63 per cent of a little over half the testimonies recording incidences where something did not materialise. Again, though, it is important to acknowledge that obviously a major conflict was in progress in this period but that this was matched by one that wasn't taking place and is completely neglected, yet no less important. As indicated earlier, however, like all absences, this was not a total one. As a recent collection of essays on emptiness argued, discussions around spatial history need to recognise the subjective and not merely the abstract nature of claims to nothingness.[22] It is finally, therefore, at the interface between the quantitative aspects surveyed above and the qualitative evidence from the BMH witness statements that we get a fuller picture of the war that never happened, just at the edge of the one that did.

It was perhaps somewhat prophetic that the first significant action of the War of Independence, at Soloheadbeg, County Tipperary, in January 1919, only came off after five days of waiting. As one of the most famous IRA men and memoirist of the War, Dan Breen, remembered:

[22] Courtney J. Campbell, Allegra Giovane and Jennifer Keating, 'Introduction', in Courtney J. Campbell, Allegra Giovane and Jennifer Keating, eds., *Empty Spaces: Perspectives on Emptiness in Modern History* (London: University of London Press, 2019), 1–3.

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> During those days of waiting our chief concern was to remain unobserved. We did not wish to be seen by the people of the locality . . . Every morning before daybreak we went noiselessly to our hiding-place and remained under cover, ever on the alert, while one of our number acted as a scout. . . . There we waited patiently until 2 o'clock each afternoon; we then abandoned our position, feeling certain that they would not come out at a later hour. . . . We spent the night at my home, and each morning about 4 o'clock my mother prepared breakfast. On the fifth morning she declared, 'If you don't do something today, you can get your own breakfast tomorrow'.[23]

The breakfast ultimatum served up by Breen's mother coincided with success for the famous ambush which followed, but it was not the last time considerable detail was devoted to waiting around. Breen later devotes the greater part of chapter eight of his famous memoir to the three months of preparation and twelve separate ambushes laid for the Lord Lieutenant, Sir John French.[24] This was written to convey dedication and activity, obviously, rather than interminable patience with the regular occurrence of nothing; *My Fight for Irish Freedom*, which appeared originally in 1924, nonetheless evokes empty streets on cold and lonely mornings, huddled frames in doorways and guns furtively held in anticipation of the fight that never came. Of course, in the case of Lord French it eventually did come and Breen's comrade, Martin Savage, lost his life in the failed attempt. Remembering the attack from his home in Los Gatos, California, thirty years later, Michael McDonnell's witness statement places himself squarely in seniority to Breen, but also finds time to dedicate a paragraph to an all-night vigil spent waiting for French.[25]

Predictably much less detail on such non-events appear in the pages of the equally famous guerrilla leader Tom Barry in his *Guerrilla Days in Ireland*. He nevertheless documents the laying and abandonment of several ambushes by his flying column (the highly mobile IRA units which lived off the support of local communities) around Bandon after reprisals on the town's population by the Essex Regiment in the wake of the Toureen ambush in October 1920. This then leads on to the recounting of another incident in which Barry and the Bantry company commander, Charlie Hurley, lay in wait to shoot a local judge through the window of his hotel room, only to be confronted with the silhouette of a woman they narrowly missed opening fire on.[26] As with Soloheadbeg, the famous Crossbarry ambush was also preceded by a non-event remembered equally evocatively by Barry:

> An hour before dawn on St Patrick's Day we occupied positions on the roadside . . . and parallel to the railway line and Bandon River in the lovely wooded valley of Shippool. We lay all day vainly waiting until four o'clock when our scouts who had been sent to Kinsale to watch the enemy movements, returned. They reported that the enemy had set out as scheduled, travelled over a mile were then halted and later returned to barracks.[27]

It is partly the memorability perhaps of such unhappenings that strikes the reader here, though the cognitive processes behind this are beyond the scope of this paper. It is, nevertheless, a feature of many witness statements in the Bureau of Military History collection that similarly cover some of the most notable ambushes of the war. These are plotted on the Brigade Activity Reports (BAR) section of the Military Archives website with a map, which has been used to identify those most intense areas and actions in the conflict. These, of course, have long been known thanks to the pioneering historical geography of the late David Fitzpatrick and his doctoral student, Peter Hart, also now sadly deceased. This has also been updated and further enhanced by the mighty tome that is the

[23] Dan Breen, *My Fight for Irish Freedom* (Dublin: Anvil Books, 1981), 33.
[24] Breen, *My Fight*, 81–95.
[25] MAI. BMH, WS.225, statement of Michael McDonnell, 4, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0225.pdf (accessed 15 June 2020).
[26] Tom Barry, *Guerilla Days in Ireland* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 2013), 36–7.
[27] Barry, *Guerilla Days*, 115.

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Atlas of the Irish Revolution, though Kautt's chapter on the ambush only highlights three: at Kilmichael, Clonfin and Tourmakeady.[28]

This section will look at the most and least intense provinces, guided by the BAR map and, once again, the Bureau's witness statements. All the main ambushes were examined to see if the experiences outlined by Breen and Barry were replicated across the country. It uncovered a great many rich examples of nothing, some quite detailed and moving almost, and others involving Tans, informers, funerals, the dangers of shrubbery and, in one case, the memorable appearance of a goat that illustrate the odd and often ridiculous nature of war.[29] In addition, some consideration has been given to the boredom so often associated with many of these instances, supported by the growing literature on the subject in recent years.[30]

Although the proportion of BMH statements tends, as shown earlier, to suggest that Leinster was slightly more intense in its experience of the Anglo-Irish War, we know that the province of Munster was in actual fact the most intense.[31] Munster was also pre-eminently associated with the ambush, with notable actions at Kilmichael, Crossbarry, Modreeny, Dripsey, Rineen and many other places. It was also the province, it seems, with the most patient IRA men. Captain Peter Browne of the Scartaglin company in East Kerry, who took part in the attacks at Clonbanin and Headford, recalled a particularly long wait in the autumn of 1920:

> About eighty men from the Ballymacelligott Company with about a dozen Volunteers from Scartaglin and Cordail spent a whole week in one position at Ballycarthy Crossroads (junction on the main Tralee-Castleisland-Killarney road) hoping to get a party of British military that were known to pass there regularly. The party lay in ambush within three miles of Tralee military post, but not a man in British uniform passed during the week.[32]

A similarly conspicuous number of men took up positions at the end of June 1921 on the Castleisland to Cork road at the picturesquely-named Knockeenahone 'for about a week, but nothing turned up'.[33] Such long waits were, it seems, the exception, however, and most statements from across the island point towards ambush positions being abandoned after a day or so. Commanding officers, like Ernie O'Malley, were often in a quandary:

> There was always a danger in remaining hidden for hours in a countryside. Where there were houses nearby, someone would notice that men would have to get food prepared for them. In a long occupation there was a risk that Volunteers would not continue on the alert indefinitely,

[28] MAI, Military Service Pensions Collection (MSPC), Brigade Activity Reports (BAR), https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/military-service-pensions-collection-1916–1923/brigade-activities (accessed 18 Feb. 2020); Fitzpatrick, 'Geography of Irish Nationalism', 113–44; Hart, 'Geography of Revolution', 142–76; W. H. Kautt, 'Ambushes in the War of Independence, 1919–21', in Crowley et al., *Atlas*, 409–15.

[29] The MSPC was not in itself consulted here because it was felt that those applying for pensions would be less inclined to document non-events, something confirmed by the application of William Dempsey, who was told only to mention ambushes that came off; see MAI, MSPC, MSP34REF1575, Military Service Pension Application of William Dempsey, Dublin, http://mspcsearch.militaryarchives.ie/docs/files//PDF_Pensions/R1/MSP34REF1575WilliamDempsey/WMSP34REF1575WilliamDempsey.pdf, 32 (accessed 28 Dec. 2020).

[30] Jorg Kustermans and Erik Ringmar, 'Modernity, Boredom, and War: A Suggestive Essay', *Review of International Studies*, 37, 4 (Oct. 2011), 1775–92; Bruno Cabanes, 'Ennui et experience de guerre', in Christophe Granger, Nathalie Richard and Sylvaine Venayre, eds., *L'Ennui, XIXème-XXème siècles* (Paris: Presse de la Sorbonne, 2012), 99–107; Michelle Fu, 'The Fascinating History of Boredom', *Conversation*, 16 Aug. 2019, https://theconversation.com/the-fascinating-history-of-boredom-118497 (accessed 22 July 2022).

[31] David Fitzpatrick, 'The Geography of the War of Independence', in Crowley et al., *Atlas*, 542.

[32] MAI, BMH, WS.1110, statement of Peter Browne, 28, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1110.pdf (accessed 9 June 2020)

[33] MAI, BMH, WS.1110, statement of Peter Browne, 54, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1110.pdf (accessed 9 June 2020).

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> and unless they had a good signalling system to give ample warning they might be unprepared to fire quickly and accurately when the necessity arose. Also, there would be uncertainty as to whether their presence had been observed by a casual passer-by. Always there was the danger from a travelling tinker, tramp, or beggar.[34]

The sense of frustration at a continued lack of action was never far away as O'Malley also remembers of his increasingly vexed orderly who declared 'I came to fight, not to walk my legs off during the day, look at officers being trained in the evening and take turns with you at sentry work during the night'.[35] A sense of boredom was equally palpable at times, as Nicholas Whittle recalled from his time among the County Waterford Volunteers: 'while there was a certain form of pleasure in drilling beneath the moonlight while thinking of the Fenians and the '48 men, I began to find myself becoming bored at the never-changing pattern of these nightly drills'.[36] Writing in the broader context of the First World War, the German Dadaist writer Walter Serner's 1915 essay, 'Die Langeweile und der Krieg' ('Boredom and War'), was among the first to note how war itself was an attempt, in part, to drive away boredom.[37] More specifically, in his intriguing article 'Dépêchez-vous d'attendre!' ('Hurry Up and Wait!'), Mathias Thura has argued that the 'wasted times' for soldiers are nonetheless a 'means of the exercise of power and an effect which follows from the organisation of military work'. He goes on to suggest that waiting in particular allows soldiers to prepare in discussing their various expectations about what lies ahead.[38]

Just previous to the Clonbanin ambush in north Cork in March 1921, several BMH statements all re-visit the three-day wait at a place named the Bower, just over the border, again in County Kerry, 'an old, bare and windswept glen', as Seán Moylan described it.[39] Manus Moynihan's recollection is perhaps the most terse, outlining the location, the participating columns, commanders and mining of the road.[40] James Daly, alternatively, gives the Bower several paragraphs, adding the detail of a Hotchkiss gun, and lists some of the many waiting that day alongside some detail on the discussions over the ambush site's abandonment.[41] John Scannell, devoting similar space, begins his narrative of nullity by mentioning the desertion of one of his men on the way to the Bower. He features much the same content as his comrades and adds the august personage of General Strickland, in charge of the British army's Sixth Division in Ireland, to the expected party which never arrived.[42] The repeated mention of the same episode of nothing happening across several statements is not a very common feature of these revolutionary memoirs and may be related to its proximity, geographically and temporally, to the actual ambush at Clonbanin. Equally, waiting was as much a lived part of people's lives as anything else, perhaps more so for those from more rural and traditional backgrounds, where time itself, so the cliché goes, passes somewhat slower anyway.

Pages of detail on awaiting enemy approaches that never materialised also precede and follow the dramatic accounts of several large and smaller ambush actions across Munster. The statements of Tim Keohane, Jack Hennessy, Seán Murphy and Con Kelleher all detail the Kilmichael ambush in west Cork, but equally devote time and space to lonelier spots with names like Tinkerscross, Fanlobbus,

[34] Ernie O'Malley, *Raids and Rallies* (Dublin: Anvil Books, 1982), 163.
[35] O'Malley, *Raids*, 173.
[36] NAI, BMH, WS.1105, statement of Nicholas Whittle, 57, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1105.pdf (accessed 1 Aug. 2022).
[37] Walter Serner, 'Die Langeweiler und der Krieg', *Mistral*, 26 Apr. 1915.
[38] Mathias Thura, 'Dépêcheez-vous d'attendre! Travail militaire et socialisation au combat', *Terrain: anthropologie et sciences humaines*, 63 (Sept. 2014), 54–72.
[39] Seán Moylan, *Seán Moylan In His Own Words* (Millstreet: Aubane Historical Society, 2003), 103.
[40] MAI, BMH, WS.1066, statement of Manus Moynihan, 5, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1066.pdf (accessed 9 June 2020).
[41] MAI, BMH, WS.1111, statement of James Daly, 5–6, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1111.pdf (accessed 9 June 2020).
[42] MAI, BMH, WS.1114, statement of John Scannell, 5, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1114.pdf (accessed 9 June 2020).

Gloundha and Brinny Crossroads. They document the placing of bodies of two suspected informers at ambush sites in Mawbeg and at Laragh to lure in soldiers and policemen who repeatedly didn't appear.[43] Hours spent looking at the crumpled remains of Michael Dwyer and Thomas Bradfield on the roadside must have been a bleak and particularly disturbing scene though their deaths, perhaps thankfully, were the only ones to take place there that day.[44] The experience evokes the view of the sniper in Liam O'Flaherty's short story of the same name, his first work of fiction, published in 1923, which although set in the Irish Civil War shows the anticipation, the wait and dread of such encounters.

Bookending Crossbarry are similar sites of rustic abandon at Ballinadee, Inchy Bridge, Shippool and Skeaf, places whose names are remembered and thus are more than mere (non) incidentals.[45] Although sharing the same name as a successful ambush in Kilkenny, the Sinnott's Cross ambush in Waterford, where twenty IRA men lay in wait all night for 'Tans . . . or Buffs', as Patrick Ormonde of Dungarvan remembered, yielded no such fruit and the tired Volunteers eventually dispersed at dawn.[46] Even in 'gallant Tipperary', noted for its early efforts in the war and the intensity of IRA activity there, the litany of what Ernie O'Malley called a 'neighbourly gathering on a mountain road' where nothing occurred is remarkable.[47] Like their comrades who opened fire at the Ragg, Toomevara and Modreeny, Seán Gaynor and Liam Hoolan list numerous other places by name, notable only for the silenced guns and chirping of the birds that accompanied hours of waiting. Interestingly, there doesn't seem to be a great deal of discussion about the surrounding flora and fauna in the witness statements in quite the same way as, for example, a growing scholarship has looked at the relationship between soldiers in the First World War and the natural environment.[48] Weather features occasionally but only really when the climatic conditions were noticeably severe and protection from them limited. Flying columns typically operated beyond the borders of their own home areas but still came overwhelmingly from rural backgrounds, and it was their knowledge of and familiarity with such terrain that proved a strength against their British opponents. The Tipp men, like some of their Clare compatriots, fail to mention, or perhaps remember, the names of such empty places.[49] It is, however, interesting to think of how in the years that would pass,

[43] MAI, BMH, WS.1295, statement of Tim Keohane, 4, 9 and 11, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1295.pdf (accessed 15 June 2020); WS.1234, statement of Jack Hennessy, 2–3, 9, 12 and 13–14, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1234.pdf (accessed 9 June 2020); WS.1445, statement of Seán Murphy, 6–12, 15–17, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1445.pdf (accessed 15 June 2020); WS.1654, statement of Con Kelleher, 6, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1654.pdf (accessed 9 June 2020).

[44] Eunan O'Halpin and Dáithí Ó Corráin, *The Dead of the Irish Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 278–80.

[45] MAI, BMH, WS.1771, statement of Flor Begley, 1–2, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1771.pdf (accessed 15 June 2020); WS.1317, statement of Con Calnan, 4–9, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1317.pdf (accessed 9 June 2020); WS. 1250, statement of John O'Driscoll, 4–5, 7–8, and 11–13, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1250.pdf (accessed 9 June 2020).

[46] MAI, BMH, WS.1283, statement of Patrick Ormonde, 17, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1283.pdf (accessed 18 Feb. 2020).

[47] O'Malley, *Raids*, 47.

[48] Examples might include Richard P. Tucker, Tait Keller, J. R. McNeill and Martin Schmid, eds., *Environmental Histories of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); John Lewis-Stempel, *Where Poppies Blow: The British Soldier, Nature and the Great War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2016), and Michael Guida, 'Nature's Sonic Order on the Western Front', *Transposition: musique et sciences sociale*, Hors-Série 2 (2020), 1–7.

[49] MAI, BMH, WS.1389, statement of Seán Gaynor, 36, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1389.pdf (accessed 29 Nov. 2019); WS.1553, statement of Liam Hoolan, 10–11, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1553.pdf (accessed 29 Nov. 2019); WS.1324, statement of Joseph Barrett, 54, https://www.

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their relationship with these empty spots remained as vivid in some ways as those where lives were lost and formed an equally significant part of the fabric of revolutionary memories.

The occasional forgetfulness of placenames is in stark contrast to the published memoir of Mossie Hartnett of the West Limerick Brigade concerning a non-encounter just a few days before the truce in July 1921:

> We finally selected a position at Templeglantine, on the road east of the church, the Post Office and shop; about half a mile from them. . . . The ambush position was a furze-covered fence running parallel to the road for over half a mile or maybe more. It was distant from the road by about one hundred yards. At its eastern end where the road swung at a right angle the fence conveniently did so too thereby following the straight stretch of road to be engulfed by rifle and machine-gun fire. . . . At the western end nearer to Abbeyfeale was a crossroads, and in between the main road and a by-road leading to the rear of the ambush position were a farmhouse, haybarn, cow byres and the usual farmyard buildings. This farmhouse at the crossroads was protected by a strong whitethorn hedge, some trees and stone walls.[50]

The few days of preparation for the large armed party of over a hundred men may have helped imprint such surroundings on Hartnett's memory, or the fact that the earlier than expected convoy of a car and three Crossley tenders full of troops passed quickly and unmolested over the mines on the road and the hidden guerrillas. A further three-day wait in blistering heat for the returning troops produced even less until the truce broke up the gathering.[51]

The Third Tipperary Brigade's engineer, Séamus Babington, was asked in the summer of 1920 to sketch out sites around Carrick-on-Suir that would be suitable for ambushes. Brigade headquarters recommended some twenty to thirty aspects to be taken into consideration, including frequent road usage by the enemy, a place non-observable to passers-by, sufficient length of road to spread out on, suitability of escape routes, availability of food and lodging for the IRA Volunteers, etc.[52] Fulfilling such an extensive list of requirements was rarely a realistic option, and even then, as Babington noted, things could still fail to happen.[53] His comrade in the Third Brigade, Andrew Kennedy, is among the few witnesses to try and acknowledge the ratio:

> While the Column . . . were active all the time, the number of actual engagements with the enemy does not quite represent their activities because, for every one of these engagements, there were numerous times when the Column planned an operation, or waited in ambush for an enemy that failed to turn up for some reason [and] the planned ambush did not come off.[54]

Even solo ambushes could prove difficult, as Waterford IRA leader Willie Keane discovered in his attempt to shoot a particularly aggressive lieutenant from the Devonshire Regiment. Tracking his quarry from a Waterford hotel to the local golf course, over a month of waiting yielded nothing.[55] Colleagues in the same county were left standing for hours in the gateway of Kings Meadow House

militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1324.pdf (accessed 29 Nov. 2019).

[50] Mossie Hartnett, *Victory and Woe: The West Limerick Brigade in the War of Independence* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2002), 109–10.

[51] Ibid., 112–14.

[52] MAI, BMH, WS.1595, statement of Séamus Babington, 73, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1595.pdf (accessed 29 Nov. 2019).

[53] MAI, BMH, WS.1595, statement of Séamus Babington, 74–9, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1595.pdf (accessed 29 Nov. 2019).

[54] MAI, BMH, WS.963, statement of Andrew Kennedy, 17, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0963.pdf (accessed 29 Nov. 2019).

[55] MAI, BMH, WS.1023, statement of William Keane, 25–6, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1023.pdf (accessed 29 Nov. 2019).

with tar and feathers for the much more unusual 'ambush' of an informer's sister who failed to appear.[56]

Of course, simply failing to appear was the most common reason for nothing taking place, though other varied and sometimes strange explanations pepper the witness statements. Among these was the ironic appearance of a funeral slowly passing across the Blackstone Bridge on the Cork-Rathcormac-Fermoy road at the same moment a targeted military convoy also passed.[57] A day of heavy snow and frost was blamed by Volunteers for the non-appearance of an expected police patrol just outside the County Tipperary village of Portroe in December 1920, whilst the presence of a woman in a car carrying British officers through Killavulen in Cork prevented the firing of shots and left Edmund Tobin holding a primed grenade.[58] Poor intelligence, the activities of informers and plain bad luck also featured among the excuses, and some of these were undoubtedly passed up the chain of command.

Leinster, by contrast with Munster, had fewer experiences of the classic rural ambush, notwithstanding the encounters at Ballinalee, Clonfin and Sylvan Park, among others. Many however, as elsewhere, met with much less success. Attempts in Wexford to ambush and disarm an ex-serviceman on his estate were defeated by particularly thick shrubbery from which issued demands from the immobile IRA Volunteer that the First World War veteran put his hands up.[59] Women rarely feature in ambush actions, but Cumann na mBan organiser Brighid O'Mullane, originally from Sligo, narrowly missed stepping into an ambush laid for her by the Kildare IRA at a bridge six or seven miles outside of Naas. She had been mistaken for a female informer operating in the district and was warned by a Volunteer not to leave the town.[60] In Wicklow, none other than future Nobel Peace Prize winner Seán MacBride arrived to suggest a whole range of madcap schemes to local Volunteers in the summer of 1921. One included an ambush on the Glenealy road at a place called Cusheen, where he placed three or four men on the bridge with rifles. As Christy Byrne remembered:

> This is a very exposed place and, of course, the men could be seen by everyone, with result that Dean's Saw Mills nearby closed down, and not only did pedestrians, cyclists, etc., but even motorists make a quick getaway and people living in houses near cleared out.[61]

Unsurprisingly, nothing happened, and an abandoned mine worried Byrne for years afterwards. South Longford, like much of Wicklow, was not particularly noted (unlike the north of the county) for its intensity, and Joe Dennigan's statement gives some fine examples of this, with one memorable encounter involving the attacking column choosing instead to hide in a river passing under a bridge

[56] MAI, BMH, WS.972, statement of Thomas Cleary, 39–40, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0972.pdf (accessed 29 Nov. 2019).

[57] MAI, BMH, WS.1009, statement of William Buckley, 7–8, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1009.pdf (accessed 29 Nov. 2019).

[58] MAI, BMH, WS. 1329, statement of Edward Ryan, 10, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1392.pdf (accessed 18 Feb. 2020); and WS.1451, statement of Edmund Tobin, 49, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1451.pdf (accessed 18 Feb. 2020).

[59] MAI, BMH, WS.1040, statement of Francis Carty, 16–17, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1040.pdf (accessed 18 Feb. 2020).

[60] MAI, BMH, WS.450, statement of Brighid O'Mullane, 23–4, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0450.pdf (accessed 15 June 2020). Linda Connolly, among others, has done much to enhance our view of women in the Irish revolution, but they feature very little in the BMH accounts of failed ambushes; see Linda Connolly, *Women and the Irish Revolution* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2020) for some mention of women's involvement in successful ambushes.

[61] MAI, BMH, WS.1014, statement of Christopher Byrne, 15, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1014.pdf (accessed 15 June 2020).

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at the ambush site while an estimated 500 cavalry passed overhead.[62] Nevertheless, in the much more active north, Seán MacEoin remembered his own fair share of empty crossroads and unreliable quarry. One of these involved an incident where their position, discovered at Killeter by the British, midway between Longford and Ballinalee, led the watching British troops to put their caps on top of their rifles from a safe distance, cheering at the waiting ambushers from an adjoining road and shouting for them to go to 'fucking Jericho'.[63] These events demonstrate error clearly in some capacity and show, as with Munster, that the waiting game was an expected and predictable part of the war, even where other aspects were unexpected. Time versus distance in such scenarios was difficult to measure, even with the advantage of local knowledge and the necessity of a secure advance and retreat, regardless of what did or didn't occur.

Dublin, of course, and its urban environment and close quarter battle seems to offer less room for nothing to happen. Cities, by their very nature, are seldom silent places, though the curfews imposed from 1920 onwards did enforce an atmosphere of terse tranquillity on Dublin. The Bureau statements of those witness to the most dramatic incidents of Bloody Sunday and the burning of the Customs House testify to vacant streets and elusive prey as much as the accounts of the country people. Even in that part of Dublin dubbed the 'Dardanelles' by the British for the frequency and danger of its ambushes, there were occasions which failed to launch. Local IRA Volunteer Michael Carroll recounted:

> We prepared to attack a lorry coming towards the town direction. James Cluskey, seeing the vehicle approaching, pulled the pin from the grenade, threw the pin away, only to find that the approaching vehicle was a large bread van. There was poor Cluskey holding the grenade in his hand. Even after a lengthy search for the pin, it could not be located. I had my pants held up with inch nails. I was able to come to the rescue, fixing a nail in place of the missing pin.[64]

An almost identical encounter detailed by Kit Farrell was later amended by a successful attack, but in spite of the claims to its deadly efficiency, there were times when the streets around this district also fell silent as guns and grenades waited for nothing.[65] Little wonder that when Captain Gerard, the former aide-de-camp to the officer commanding the Fifth Division of the British army in Ireland, spoke to the Bureau of Military History in 1950, he referred to the nature of the conflict, saying 'it was all so elusive'.[66]

Although silence tended to reign in most ambush scenarios, a little sardonic humour enlivened the boredom of a long wait. In an account full of lack of incident, Thomas Dwyer, a member of two Wexford flying columns, remembered one such incident after several days at a place outside Enniscorthy known as Kehoe's Cuttings:

> The humourist of the column, wittily remarked on the last day that the column lay in ambush, as he carried a giant home-made bomb about, 'if anyone from Lloyd George to Ned Pepper comes along I'll throw it at them' (Ned Pepper was a telegram boy in Enniscorthy).[67]

[62] MAI, BMH, WS.1321, statement of Joseph Dennigan, 9, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1321.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020); Marie Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish Revolution, 1910–1923* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003), 42 and 129–30.

[63] MAI, BMH, WS.1716, statement of Seán MacEoin, 60–1 and 94, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1716pt1.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

[64] MAI, BMH, WS.1210, statement of Michael Carroll, 5, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1210.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

[65] MAI, BMH, WS.1299, statement of Christopher 'Kit' Farrell, 14–15, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1299.pdf (accessed 16 June 2020); WS.1147, statement of Alphonsus Sweeney, 8, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1147.pdf (accessed 16 June 2020).

[66] MAI, BMH, WS.348, statement of Captain E. Gerrard, 8, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0348.pdf (accessed 16 June 2020).

[67] MAI, BMH, WS.1198, statement of Thomas Dwyer, 20, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1198.pdf (accessed 16 June 2020).

Perhaps more redolent of such humour are the thoughts of Ernie O'Malley on the long stand to: 'frequently in such a situation the most incongruous thoughts would jumble together and a dry or blatant sense of humour would throw out a series of laughter ripples which had to be stifled in the short grass'.[68] As one reviewer remarked, this sounds almost like the school environment (or Mass, as another suggested), though it seems reasonable to assume that this was a generation inured to the wait and to silence in many respects, much more so than later generations, though perhaps less so than the generation before them.

In Connacht, the intensity of particular units such as in Connemara, North Roscommon and West Mayo also bely moments of nothingness, some of which were sublime in their inertia. Leenane, County Galway men Peter McDonnell and John Feehan, veterans of important attacks in Kilmeena and Skerdagh, both provide details on a four-day wait in an ambush position on the shores of Lough Derrylea. The environment, its topography, colour and cadence, as well as its defensive and offensive properties from a military perspective, all come across vividly in the statements of both men. They also detail the nightly retreat to a mountain hideout, the songs and stories in the downtime from the anxious and ultimately fruitless wait on the loughshore several miles away. Although the location does not seem to have been discovered, the religious zeal of at least two of the ambush party in confessing to local mission priests their intentions led to protracted discussions between McDonnell and Feehan and senior members of the clergy. These debates on the ethics and morality of the conflict, however, produced no more resolution than that sought by the roadside, leading the column to try their luck on the streets of Clifden. Here also, however, the police and soldiers failed to make themselves targets, and it would require another full day's wait, retreat and return before shots could finally be exchanged in the town.[69] As Augusteijn noted, successful ambushes whereby the IRA engaged their enemy and inflicted casualties often came off almost accidentally or in fighting a rearguard action.[70]

There were also occasions when the potential cost of an ambush proved too great for the risk. These likely fall into the realms of the counterfactual/what if category, but one Roscommon ambush set to shoot members of a Black and Tan garrison in Lanesboro, County Longford is perhaps different. News reached the IRA that members of the garrison came out and sat on the walls by the bridge over the Shannon. As Frank Simons recalled, coming after several other failed attempts in late June and early July 1921 where 'the enemy did not oblige by turning up', this seemed a positive, and stationary, opportunity:

> We took up positions with the Column in the houses overlooking the bridge on the Roscommon side and waited for them to appear. Only one Tan came out and sat on the wall. But we did not fire at him. We wanted bigger game. They did not come out that afternoon and, after waiting some considerable time, the operation was called off. Quite a few attempts had been made to get a crack at the men of this garrison, but they all failed to materialise.[71]

Of course, the ambush of one individual was sometimes keenly sought after, though the one laid for the elusive secret policeman, Eugene Igoe, on a trip to Galway early in 1921 fell through because the

[68] O'Malley, *Raids*, 148.

[69] MAI, BMH, WS.1612, statement of Peter McDonnell, 27–34, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1612.pdf (accessed 17 Oct. 2019), and WS.1692, statement of John Feehan, 30–4, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1692.pdf (accessed 17 Oct. 2019).

[70] Joost Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerilla Warfare: The Experience of Ordinary Volunteers in the Irish War of Independence* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996), 136–7. The reference here to 'game' and earlier 'quarry' does seem redolent of a rural population used to the sporting language of hunting.

[71] MAI, BMH, WS.770, statement of Frank Simons, 37, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0770.pdf (accessed 19 Oct. 2019).

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required weapons did not arrive in time.[72] Another ambush position was not re-occupied in time after a long wait because the Volunteers were having tea in a village several hundred yards from the proposed site of the action.[73] Smarting, however, from the caution and inaction of the local commander, Roscommon IRA man Patrick Mullooly and two of his comrades decided to go ahead and ambush policemen or Tans in the town of Elphin on their own. Approaching the barracks to await the opportune moment, they were presented with only a he-goat in the middle of the deserted street who seemed aware of their presence and began braying though 'ammunition was too valuable to waste a shot', recalled Mullooly, 'so we left the town to darkness and the puck goat'. Placing blame squarely on the battalion's leader, Mullooly claimed that there were fifteen separate occasions when 'contact with the enemy' failed to take place.[74]

Of all the provincial experiences of the War of Independence, Ulster's is often the most difficult to gauge. In terms of intensity, though, it is more straightforward in spite of the extremely violent internecine conflict witnessed in Derry in the summer of 1920 and Belfast the following summer. Both rural and urban Ulster saw much less of the classic guerrilla ambush associated with the war, partly as a result of the sectarian geography of the majority of the nine counties, but also because of the longer war which characterised much of the conflict in what became Northern Ireland. Early non-events, therefore, fell into a predictable pattern. In 1920, Volunteers from the Glens of Antrim lay in wait outside the village of Cushendall for the threatened invasion of Orangemen, who apparently abandoned their plans.[75] Besides waiting for Orangemen, repeated attempts to seize Ulster Volunteer Force weapons from an imagined cache at a stately home on the shores of Lough Neagh gave Belfast IRA men little more than long walks and fresh air.[76] Operating in the city offered different problems and was stated by one Belfast Volunteer to be much more hazardous than Dublin, where considerable sympathy existed. Belfast, in contrast, was a place where 'three-fourths of the population' were 'bitterly hostile (many actively so)'.[77] Such impediments existed beyond the mean streets of Belfast, and in one of the few statements which look at the Fermanagh IRA, James Smyth argued:

> The difficulties under which the IRA operated in County Fermanagh were constantly very great and often insurmountable. Company areas were isolated from each other and from their Batt. H.Q.s. Batt. areas were in the same position as regards their Brigades. It must also be remembered that the majority of those who were opposed to the IRA were fully armed and constantly on the look-out for any movement on the part of the IRA.[78]

Although this was partly in explanation of a prolonged and futile wait at a place called the Double-Corners, close to Enniskillen, it may offer an explanation for some of the lost encounters eagerly anticipated by Northern Volunteers. As another Volunteer, Patrick Maguire in Tyrone,

[72] MAI, BMH, WS.674, statement of J. Togher, 3, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0674.pdf (accessed 19 Oct. 2019).

[73] MAI, BMH, WS.1125, statement of Thomas O'Mahony, 7, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1125.pdf (accessed 19 Oct. 2019).

[74] MAI, BMH, WS.955, statement of Patrick Mullooly 18, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0955.pdf (accessed 19 Oct. 2019) and WS.1086, statement of Patrick Mullooly, 32, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1086.pdf (accessed 19 Oct. 2019).

[75] MAI, BMH, WS.609, statement of Felim McGuill, 4, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0609.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

[76] MAI, BMH, WS.412, statement of Joseph Murray, 7–8, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0412.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

[77] MAI, BMH, WS.1016, statement of Séamus McKenna, 17, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1016.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

[78] MAI, BMH, WS.559, statement of James Smyth, 5, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0559.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

memorably recalled of his own county, 'in many places nothing happened'.[79] The fact that 'nothing happened' may simply be a turn of phrase, but its repetition throughout the statements is stark.

Such an honest and open admission of the objective ennui of the war also applies to those areas of Ulster where actions did take place in spite of the obstacles with some kind of regularity. Accounts in the Bureau of Military History testify to repeated attempts to locate, stalk and kill several energetic and objectionable policemen on the streets of Dromore, County Tyrone, in Hilltown, County Down, in Belfast city centre and in Dungloe, County Donegal. As elusive as all these individual targets for assassination proved to be after repeated lingering around police barracks, pubs, side streets and other conspicuous and inconspicuous locations, one was later shot and wounded by another more successful unit.[80] Alternatively, Newry-based IRA man Hugh Gribben had to restrain his increasingly frustrated comrade in the seaside town of Warrenpoint when a solitary policeman appeared finally on the streets after hours of waiting for more substantial quarry.[81] Meanwhile, enthusiastic flying column men in south Monaghan and west Donegal also became intimate with their own panoply of unproductive set pieces. Inadequate cover provided by a low hedge and increasingly hungry bellies combined to force Francis Tummons and his column to withdraw from near Newbliss, County Monaghan after a wait from dawn to 3pm for the expected but evasive enemy forces.[82] For the mixed company of Derry and Donegal men assembled amidst the rocky landscape outside of Dungloe to await a party of Black and Tans, only the hot tea dispensed by supportive locals lingered in the memory of Séamus McCann. A second attempt soon after on the winding road from Dungloe to Crolly received only repeated soakings from the relentless winter rain in January 1921. Two successful encounters at Meenabad and Crolly railway stations may have recompensed the patience of the column, but normal service resumed after some days' rest in the Donegal mountains when consecutive attempts to intercept Tans in and around their admittedly lonely location at a place called Brockagh yielded zero results.[83]

In the majority of ambush positions, the main issues were boredom, impatience, occasional unsolicited humour and frustration. Physical effects rarely went beyond tiredness, cramp and hunger or thirst, but in a couple of cases in Ulster hard physical labour attended attempts to lay low the enemy. One of these, late in 1920, at a place called Minegar between Fintona and Trillick in County Tyrone, arose out of some forced labour at a bridge which local Volunteers had broken down and were then compelled at police gunpoint to re-build. The IRA then decided it would be a good spot for an ambush of returning policemen checking on the bridge, but a week of waiting every day until past midnight proved useless and the decision was then taken to more thoroughly demolish the little bridge once again, no doubt venting some of their pent-up feelings in the process.[84] To the south, in County Monaghan, John McGahey recalled three attempts to intercept a train at a place called Doohamlet. On the first occasion, the train merely rattled past the unfortunate and

[79] MAI, BMH, WS.693, statement of Patrick Maguire, 7, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0693.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

[80] MAI, BMH, WS.721, statement of Nicholas Smyth, 13, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0721.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020); WS.890, statement of Edward Fullerton, 16, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0890.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020); WS.1016, statement of Séamus McKenna, 16, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1016.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).and WS.1448, statement of Patrick Breslin, 16, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1448.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

[81] MAI, BMH, WS.640, statement of Hugh Gribben, 12–14, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0640.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

[82] MAI, BMH, WS.820, statement of Francis Tummon, 31–2, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0820.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

[83] MAI, BMH, WS.763, statement of Séamus McCann, 12–13 and 15, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0763.pdf (accessed 11 Aug. 2021).

[84] MAI, BMH, WS.721, statement of Nicholas Smyth, 6–7, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0721.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

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powerless Volunteers. A second attempt resulted in a lonely and unproductive vigil, and finally, the decision was taken to actually lift sections of the track and set up a signalling system to alert the driver and bring the locomotive to a halt. Once again, though, the wait was in vain; the IRA men replaced the rails and were departing their positions when the train finally hurtled past, again unmolested.[85] Unobtainable policemen, unreliable army convoys, absent commanders and occasionally better armed opposition interfered with, delayed and ultimately scuppered attacks in Bundoran, Newry and Castleblayney from the summer of 1920 to the spring of 1921.[86] As Lieutenant-Colonel Francis Tummon recalled of a trip to shoot the policemen of Lisnaskea, County Fermanagh, from the perspective of 1953 and his position as a senior officer in the Irish army:

> At this time we were all armed – all fifteen of [the] party carried rifles. We travelled on foot via road and railway track, a distance of seven miles, arriving in good time. In a field just off the main street of the town, rather below the level of the road, positions were taken up along a ditch. Here we remained for almost two hours in hopes a patrol would come along, until finally a scout . . . informed us no police were out. Another unsuccessful mission! RIC patrols were then irregular in their movements and it was a sort of hit and miss on our part. However, when they did not turn up our Company Commander decided to call it off. We returned without incident.[87]

For some, however, such an unvarnished assessment of the reality of finding and killing the enemy belied a wider reality. Speaking with the famous republican writer Ernie O'Malley in the 1940s, Donegal veteran IRA leader Peadar O'Donnell admitted that in many areas they 'had not very much to do for there were few enemy'. O'Malley himself noted how 'Peadar's idea of holding an area was to make government impossible. Casualties were not as important. . . . This, I said, was the real view of the situation. There was no attempt to drive the British out of Ireland, but the main objective was to make government for them impossible'.[88] For the Northerners, of course, that was a longer project and the waiting at some silent crossroads became, in a sense, emblematic of the longer wait, as yet unfulfilled, for the War of Independence to come to an end.

In conclusion, the conflict between Britain and Ireland in the years 1919 to 1921 was in many ways a war of intangibles. This was not in itself a unique experience, and Europe's numerous partisan bands during the Second World War undoubtedly experienced forms of irregular warfare not at all unlike those in Ireland in an earlier period. Participants and commentators have long acknowledged that the conceptual 'virtually established' republic, its materialising and de-materialising government, and its undulating guerrilla war gave it the character of what one of the earliest oral histories referred to as a 'curious journey'.[89] Fitzpatrick remarked many years later on the often meagre rewards of IRA ambush attacks, which often had an equally meagre military outlay.[90] Perhaps this, like the abandoned ambush, was merely indicative of the practical learning curve of forces who were incrementally

[85] MAI, BMH, WS.740, statement of John McGahey, 14, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0740.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

[86] MAI, BMH, WS.1566, statement of Joseph Murray, 11–13, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1566.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020); WS.890, statement of Edward Fullerton, 5 and 15, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0890.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020), and WS.518, statement of James Sullivan, 9–10, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0518.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

[87] MAI, BMH, WS.820, statement of Francis Tummon, 37, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913–1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0820.pdf (accessed 17 June 2020).

[88] Síobhra Aiken, Fearghal MacBhloscaidh, Liam Ó Duibhir and Diarmuid Ó Tuama, eds., *The Men Will Talk to Me: Ernie O'Malley's Interviews with the Northern Divisions* (Dublin: Merrion Press, 2018), 245.

[89] Kenneth Griffith and Timothy E. O'Grady, *Curious Journey: An Oral History of Ireland's Unfinished Revolution* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1982).

[90] David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life, 1913–21: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1977), 225.

improving in technique and success as time went by. The war is often seen as a series of engagements centred on the classic ambush, whilst major events in Dublin and Cork combined to tilt the revolutionary wheel towards victory (of sorts) for the IRA. A far greater level of activity than is often assumed is concealed in the nothingness at the heart of the conflict, whereby silences and emptiness and sometimes the boring, comedic and downright ridiculous often predominate. That might not prove an attractive site for commemorative events, but its nullity is as important for histories of the war, and as full of incident as the war that did happen.

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