Rebel hearts: New Zealand’s fenian families & the Easter Rising

This paper will consider a New Zealand dimension to the Irish rebellion of April 1916. Specifically it will consider the ways in which New Zealand Irish responded after the Easter Rising to continued calls from the Empire to serve the King. To set the scene, however, it is first necessary to consider the term ‘fenian’ and establish what that might have meant in a New Zealand context in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Note the small ‘f’; used here to indicate that we are not referring to what the term might have meant in Ireland or America, either pre or post-Rising. In those places, and in some other parts of the Irish diaspora, Fenian was an umbrella term for a range of different political organisations dedicated to the establishment of an Irish Republic. Chief among them were the Fenian Brotherhood, Clan Na Gael, and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the latter being the organisation in whose name the Easter Rising was mounted in 1916. In New Zealand ‘fenianism’ was much less about formal membership in bodies like the Irish Republican Brotherhood (though it might have meant this in a very few instances as we shall see), nor in Sinn Fein later on.

Fenianism in New Zealand

To be a ‘fenian’ (small ‘f’), on the other hand, could be simply to share in a sense of antipathy to British rule in Ireland. The term is used here to reference an attitude; an amorphous anti-English, anti-Crown, anti-Empire disposition that lacked focus in New Zealand before 1916 but was nonetheless bred deep in the bone for many New Zealand Irish families. Looking for something more concrete, it is hard to say how much support there was in New Zealand for the physical force tradition of Irish nationalism, as represented by the Fenians or the I.R.B. in that period. Traditions of violent resistance to the Anglo-Protestant establishment were deep-seated in the rural Ireland from which most of the immigrant generation had come, however. Memories, if not membership, of secret agrarian societies of resistance, such as the Whiteboys or the Ribbonmen, must have formed part of the intellectual baggage of many Irish immigrants to New Zealand. There were also families who came to New Zealand with recent experiences of eviction, carrying resentments whose memory was passed on through the generations and could be easily revived.

A matter of timing

There was much less impact from early 20th-century political developments in Ireland, however, for two main reasons. One was the relatively short timescale of substantial Irish migration to New Zealand. Mass Irish migration was concentrated in a 20-year period, from about 1860 to 1880, for some parts of which the Irish formed up to a quarter of all New Zealand-bound migrants. Once the large-scale assisted immigration programmes of the 1860s and 1870s came to an end, however, the Irish proportion of subsequent New Zealand migration shrank to minor significance. The selection of immigrants also generally reverted to the traditional preference for Ulster migrants, skewed towards Protestants but also drawing in some notably politicised Ulster Catholics in the immediate pre-war years. The numbers were small though; Irish migration had slowed to a trickle by the end of the 19th century. It has remained at a low level ever since, even when taking short-term surges in the 1920s, 1950s and 1970s into account.¹

The timing of the main burst of mass Irish migration is highly significant. Most of New Zealand’s Irish migrants came from an Ireland where ‘Fenianism’ was in something of a slump. They were gone before a late-century resurgence kicked in. This saw the rise of the so-called Gaelic Revival on
the cultural front and its infiltration by a new generation of Irish Republican Brotherhood physical force advocates with revolutionary political ambitions. The transformation these movements exerted on Irish affairs fashioned an Irish political and cultural context that was alien to the New Zealand diaspora – they had left a very different Ireland. A minor surge in migration just pre-WWI, however, included a number of Republican agitators and others exposed to the Gaelic Revival and possibly entangled in I.R.B. subversion. They were to play a key role in wartime acts of Irish resistance in New Zealand.

19th-century ‘fenian’ demonstrations in New Zealand

There had been at least two colonial-era demonstrations of violence on behalf of Irish causes in New Zealand that were on a scale sufficient to draw a significant government response. On the first occasion, in 1868, funeral processions were held in Hokitika and Charleston on behalf of three Fenian prisoners who had been executed in Manchester. Coming soon after an attempted assassination in Sydney of Prince Alfred (Queen Victoria’s second son) by a suspected Fenian, these demonstrations prompted arrests on the West Coast, the swearing in of hundreds of special constables and the temporary despatch south of a British Army regiment from its service in the North Island. A similarly overwhelming police and military response was also mounted in response to the so-called ‘Boxing Day riots’ in Timaru and Christchurch in 1879, when Irish Catholic opposition to Orange marches in the two southern cities threatened a serious outbreak of sectarian violence.  

Financial support was also available to Fenian organisers who toured New Zealand in the 19th century. Their clandestine visits attracted none of the public fanfare enjoyed by their constitutional equivalents, the Irish Home Rule advocates who also came to the colonies on fund-raising missions. A surviving report from 1876 by an Australian convict Fenian, Edward Kelly, to the American-based Fenian leader Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa recorded that a Fenian “organisation” had been active in New Zealand in 1868, raising funds toward the release of Fenian prisoners in Western Australia. Kelly also stated that one of the West Australian convicts, John Flood, visited New Zealand after his release and “started the organisation anew, remodelling the old one”. In 1876 Michael Cody followed up on Flood’s visit to raise funds in New Zealand for the famous Fenian rescue mission to Western Australia on the “Catalpa”. Though little evidence remains, it is fair to assume that some New Zealand Irish would have cheered O’Donovan Rossa’s Fenian dynamiters in the 1870s when they planted bombs in English cities and even the terrorist assassinations by the so-called “Irish Invincibles” of the 1880s. Apart from the evidence of Kelly’s report to Rossa, there were photographic reproductions of portrait sketches of the “Irish Invincibles”, reprinted from a Weekly Irish Times Supplement, on sale in Dunedin in 1883. This suggests that there was a market for such ‘souvenirs’, presumably among fenian-disposed local Irish.

Yet it must have also been obvious to New Zealand’s Irish Catholic communities that no good had come out of the demonstrations on the West Coast in 1868 and even less from the Boxing Day riots in Timaru and Christchurch in 1879. The strong negative reaction to these incidents by the wider (Protestant) community conveyed a very clear lesson: living among a majority Protestant population, New Zealand’s Irish Catholics needed to keep their heads down and refrain from public expression of any radical Irish political enthusiasms. Whatever traditions of Irish resistance had come with the 19th-century immigrant cohort – what might be called ‘fenianism’ in the broadest sense – those traditions had proven incompatible with New Zealand realities and were largely abandoned by 1900.
Instead, a conscious strategy of Catholic integration into the mainstream was under way and working well, forging a place for Irish Catholics as – to use Chris van der Krogt’s insightful phrase – ‘a part of’ rather than ‘apart from’ New Zealand society.

The strength of Irish ‘Home Rule’ as a political position on the other hand, and the depth of support for the Irish parliamentary delegations who toured to New Zealand in the late 19th and early 20th century (1889, 1895, and 1911), represented the more popular tradition of constitutional progress towards Irish independence. This was meeting with increasing acceptance in New Zealand on a broad front in the pre-war years. It posited unity within the Empire on the Australasian model as the template for Ireland’s future. The outbreak of war offered a superb platform to demonstrate this. As Catholic soldiers gave their lives on New Zealand’s behalf, their sacrifice was a testimony to their common citizenship within the Empire. Fenianism was, in contrast, a relic of another time and place. It seemed irrelevant to the new colonial society emerging with increasing Irish integration in New Zealand. Fenianism, as an attitude and a folk memory, was still there, however, like a bacillus waiting to be re-energised by propitious circumstances.

The Rising and New Zealand’s War

The events of the Easter Rising (24-30 April 1916) fall neatly between the end of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign and the transfer of a rebuilt New Zealand Division to the Western Front. The New Zealand Division arrived in Marseille in mid-April 1916, about a fortnight before the Rising in Dublin. The impact of the fighting in the Dardanelles through 1915 had eviscerated the original New Zealand Expeditionary Force, the 8,500-strong contingent that set off for war carrying the hopes and pride of a nation in October 1914. Some 2,800 New Zealanders were killed at Gallipoli and about 6,000 more became casualties (wounded or ill). While the real burden of death and disaster for New Zealand’s war effort still lay ahead on the Somme and in Flanders, enough had already happened by April 1916 to prick New Zealand’s pre-war bubble of hyper-Imperialism.

The three-fold expansion of the Expeditionary Force at the beginning of 1916, from a Brigade to a Division, also upped the ante for New Zealand’s manpower commitments. With over 5,000 new recruits needed every two months, the pool of willing volunteers began to dry up. By early 1916 it was clear that some form of compulsion would be required to keep up the flow of reinforcements and ensure that the burden of service would fall heaviest on those with the least social responsibilities. It would take until November 1916 before the necessary legislation and administrative machinery was in place for conscription ballots to begin. By that time, events in Ireland in the aftermath of the Easter Rising were beginning to cast a significant shadow over Catholic New Zealand’s enthusiasm for “England’s war”. While support for the war effort remained the majority Catholic position, there was now room for an alternative view, and alternative responses.

Supporting Sinn Fein: joining the struggle in Ireland

Sinn Fein had emerged from the rubble of Dublin in 1916 as the political party of Irish Republicans. British contemporary sources referred to the rebellion as the “Sinn Fein Rising”, such that the party name entered the political lexicon around the Empire. Support for the Republican cause was therefore commonly conflated with support for Sinn Fein. Expressing such support from New Zealand, however, was problematic. Active participation in armed struggle in Ireland was not really
an option, except for the few New Zealand servicemen who deserted while on leave in Ireland and joined armed Republican bands.

New Zealand military police records document two such cases. A report from the New Zealand Provost Corps in March 1918 stated that “it is quite apparent that the majority of our deserters are hiding in Ireland, where special inducements are offered them by the Sinn Fein element. At least one of our deserters, J. Griffen, is known to be drilling Sinn Feiners in County Kerry.” This was Jeremiah Griffin, a recent immigrant from County Kerry who had been working as a gold miner at Glenhope, near Nelson, when he was called up in early 1917. He appealed his call-up on hardship and conscientious grounds (quoting the 5th commandment “Thou shalt not kill”) but was prepared to serve in a non-combatant role. Griffin was given a temporary deferral by the Military Service Board so that he could sell his sluicing claim. Once he had done so, he entered camp at the beginning of May and went overseas with the 27th Reinforcements in July. While still in training in Britain, however, he deserted the N.Z.E.F. and headed for home to join the armed struggle in Ireland. Recapturing New Zealand deserters in Ireland had become problematic by 1918, however, as Sinn Fein activity ramped up in many counties in the wake of the Rising. This made the country an ideal refuge for deserters and absentees. Ireland was accordingly placed out-of-bounds for New Zealand soldiers for a fortnight in early 1918 and the Irish civil police were instructed to arrest every man in New Zealand uniform that they came across during that period. The results were disappointing; just one ‘absentee’ was arrested, although many more were known to be in the country. The second confirmed New Zealander to have involved himself in Sinn Fein military activity was Frederick James McKenna whose desertion in mid-1918 underlined the difficulties that Ireland posed for the New Zealand Provosts. Even though they knew that he was in Milltown, County Clare, it was no simple matter to go and pick him up, given the strength of Sinn Fein in that county.

McKenna was New Zealand-born, from Patea in Taranaki. He had been working as a government clerk in Wellington when he volunteered for military service the day after his 20th birthday in May 1917. As a former cadet and a serving Territorial, he had twice tried to enlist while under-age so there is no evidence of a reluctance to fight in his case. He went overseas with the Wellington Infantry Regiment in February 1918 and served for a time at the frontline in France before falling ill. Recuperating in hospital in England in July, however, he absented himself and headed to his father’s people in County Clare. There he remained for the next year, becoming involved alongside his relations in Sinn Fein activity with the newly formed Irish Republican Army. Eventually the New Zealand military arranged for Irish police assistance to apprehend McKenna. When they swooped, in July 1919, “owing to the hostile attitude of the Sinn Feiners in Co. Clare, the escort and prisoner had to be conveyed in an armoured car from Ennis to Limerick. According to McKenna’s own storey [sic], he had been a Captain in the Sinn Fein ‘Army’ for some time.”

Supporting Sinn Fein: the New Zealand options

For those Irish resident in wartime New Zealand, there was little chance of joining the fight in Ireland itself. That really left only two practical ways of supporting the Republican cause: undertaking propaganda on behalf of Sinn Fein and/or withdrawing support for the Imperial war effort. For men of military age, the latter meant avoiding military service, while for others it might mean supporting such men in their evasion efforts. The New Zealand War Regulations, initially promulgated in November 1914 but constantly refined thereafter, made it difficult to pursue either course.
Seditious speech was covered off with some fairly catch-all definitions to encompass any expression of opposition to the war. Leading members of the newly formed Labour Party discovered this to their cost in late 1916 and early 1917 when they spoke out against the recently imposed conscription regime. Public comments by Paddy Webb, Bob Semple, future Prime Minister Peter Fraser, and others, put them in breach of the “seditious utterances” regulations and they quickly found themselves in prison. At the other end of the scale, a couple of drunken Irishmen mouthing off about the English and their war in a hotel bar were equally liable to find themselves before the court. John O’Neill and Thomas Finucane were jailed for eleven months for expressing such sentiments in a hotel at Morrinsville in August 1917. You had to walk a very fine line in wartime New Zealand in making any statements critical of the war effort or likely to prejudice recruitment.

Nonetheless, there were those prepared to push the limits on behalf of a cause. A small group of Irish Sinn Fein supporters, for example, came together in Dunedin in late 1916 to form the first branch of what would become the Maoriland Irish Society. Ostensibly an Irish social organisation, a number of the new organisation’s key players were relatively recent immigrants, some of whom claimed Irish Republican Brotherhood pedigrees. Alongside their dances and musical evenings, these radical members of the new Society also organised a publication to promote their Republican and socialist views. Called The Green Ray, the first issue appeared in December 1916, just a month after the conscription ballots had begun. Declaring itself “the only truly Irish newspaper South of the Line, and the only Republican journal in Australasia” the Green Ray was unequivocal in its support for Sinn Fein and its opposition to conscription.

It reported with approval the efforts of conscientious objectors to evade the New Zealand military authorities and lauded the West Coast Irish in particular for providing a haven for evaders. Over the next 18 months the Dunedin journal pushed these editorial lines without fear or favour until finally coming to the attention of the authorities in mid-1918. It was the May 1918 edition, a memorial issue to the Easter Rising martyrs headed “The Memory of the Dead”, that finally prompted the Green Ray’s suppression. The Dunedin police raided the magazine’s office and arrested its editor, Thomas Cummins, and manager, Albert Ryan, for sedition. In the trial that followed, the presiding judge declared that it “seemed to him that on every page [of the Green Ray] there was a seditious utterance” and sentenced the pair to 11 months hard labour.

The imprisoned editor of the Green Ray, Thomas Cummins, had an interesting Irish background. The son of a sergeant in the Royal Irish Constabulary, Cummins was from County Kildare and had been a founding member of the Gaelic League at Portarlington. League founder Douglas Hyde had been a visitor to their home while Cummins junior also had dealings with Patrick Pearse and Thomas McDonagh through the League, or so he claimed. In Dunedin, Cummins claimed for himself an exciting pre-New Zealand background as a journalist, teacher and soldier in the United States, Mexico, Argentina and Uruguay but these details are probably bogus. In fact, he had followed his father into the Irish police force, serving from 1905-12 before emigrating to New Zealand with his new wife, Kathleen MacOwen. He then joined the New Zealand Police, only to become enmeshed in agitation over police conditions and leaving the force in 1913. Cummins came to Dunedin as correspondent for the Truth newspaper, in which capacity he covered the story of the 14 conscientious objectors (including three of the Baxter brothers from Brighton) who were secretly shipped overseas by the New Zealand military authorities in July 1917.
Married and with three young children, Cummins was not liable for military service, and in any case had a medical exemption. This left him free to be the public face of the Green Ray as well as its chief writer. His offsider, Albert Ryan, was the business manager. Born in Waitahuna, Ryan’s father had a family history of dispossession in Ireland, coming to Otago via the United States and Victoria reputedly with something of an ‘attitude’ towards authority. Bert, as the youngest in a family of ten, had lost his mother when young and grew up in his father’s care. He was also strongly influenced growing up by his local priest, Monsignor O’Leary, who was virtually unique among the Otago Catholic clergy for his fervent fenian sympathies. O’Leary was an enthusiastic supporter of the Maoriland Irish Society and was to have contributed a Gaelic column to the Green Ray but died in 1917. Bert Ryan had moved to Dunedin in 1908. He was working as a commercial traveller when he became embroiled in the radical Irish politics that would see him in jail in 1918.11

Behind the scenes at the Green Ray were two other key players, both post-1900 arrivals from Ulster with strong Republican pedigrees. The first was James Bradley, a carpenter from Magherafelt, County Derry, whose name never appears in the magazine but is credited with the idea of establishing it in the first place. He had been very active in the militant republican movement prior to coming to New Zealand around the turn of the century. He was even reputed to have been a representative on the Supreme Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood for a time (a claim that has not been verified). Bradley was called up in a conscription ballot in mid-1917 while farming near Mataura. After failing to appear for his army medical, he was automatically deemed a deserter and went ‘underground’ in Dunedin. He was sheltered for a time in the suburb of Mornington by prominent Dunedin socialist Arthur McCarthy, who was writing a column for the Green Ray. When McCarthy’s son, Arthur Gregory McCarthy, was also called up he joined Bradley on the run. The pair then took shelter in Sawyers Bay with the Gordon family, Church of Ireland Protestants from County Antrim.12

Bradley was fortunate not to be picked up in the police raid on the Green Ray office. He continued to evade the authorities successfully until he managed to stow away to Australia. Arthur McCarthy was not so lucky. He was captured in Christchurch in 1920 and sentenced to a year in prison for desertion. After the war, however, both men eventually returned to Dunedin and married the two Gordon daughters. Another key figure who also escaped capture in the raid was the Green Ray’s resident Gaelic language expert, Sean Tohill. Tohill was a member of a large Ulster Catholic family that had immigrated to New Zealand in 1909 and settled in Napier. Also from Magherafelt, Sean Tohill had been a close friend of Jim Bradley’s in Ireland where the Tohills were notorious fenians. Sean is believed by descendants to have been an I.R.B. member there. In one of his Green Ray columns, he describes being a founding member of the Dungannon Clubs, a front organisation for I.R.B. recruitment in pre-war Ulster, and to have personally known Pearse, Plunkett, McDonagh, McBride and Clarke – the ringleaders of the Easter Rising and signatories to its key document, the Declaration of the Irish Republic.13

The Tohills were key personalities in the Napier branch of the Maoriland Irish Society and three of the boys, including Sean, became military evaders once their names were drawn in conscription ballots. Sean had headed south to Dunedin in early 1918 and after his Green Ray colleagues were taken into custody he hid out at Gimmerburn, near Ranfurly in Central Otago. He went under the alias “Ferguson”, passing himself off as Scottish. He stayed with the Dougherty family from County Cork and began a relationship with the daughter of the house, Sarah. The couple married in 1920
and moved to Wellington after an amnesty was declared at the end of that year for all military defaulters still at large. Family members recall that on his deathbed, Sarah called Sean “Fergie” recalling the name by which she had first known him in the dark days of WWI.

If there was an oath-bound I.R.B. circle in Dunedin in 1916-18, these four were almost certainly in it. The Maoriland Irish Society offered a classic ‘front’ for their promotion of Irish Republicanism, with the Green Ray their most important propaganda tool. There are a few clues that support this speculation. One is a reference in the magazine to the Society being “linked up with our brethren at Home and in America”, though of course this could mean little more than a vague unity of purpose. Another is a statement by M.I.S. member Patrick Cody, who referred in passing to already being oath-bound during his trial for refusing military service in August 1917. Oath-bound or not, it is notable that the M.I.S. branches that were established around New Zealand – at Dunedin, Wellington, Gisborne, Napier and Hastings, and Riversdale, Auckland, Invercargill and the West Coast - also co-relate fairly precisely with the geography of Irish resistance to military service. These include the centres most associated with conscription evaders and their support networks.

Option Two: Evading Military Service

Refusing support for the war effort, by avoiding military service, was the second option available to New Zealand fenians. It was probably the primary expression of Irish resistance to British Imperialism in New Zealand after 1916. Avoiding military service was easy enough while enlistment was purely voluntary since it required no public fanfare; you simply didn’t volunteer. Once conscription made service compulsory for men selected in the ballots, however, it became a more challenging option. Taking a stand meant bearing public opprobrium and also facing imprisonment. There was little allowance for conscientious objection under the regulations, with exemption limited to a very narrow definition of religious opposition to war. The views of pacifists, socialists, and men opposed to war on wider religious grounds were deemed an insufficient basis for principled objection. Irish objections did not even merit consideration. All of these men were lumped together at the time into a single category – “shirkers”.

The Irish dimension of “shirking” is hard to pin down. Delineating the motivations of evaders is complicated by the fact that records of those who were caught do not usually report the grounds of their objection. For the much larger number of those who evaded successfully, there is even less trace in the historical record of what prompted them to defy the state. This opens any tabulation based on external characteristics to the challenge of determinism. For instance, just because someone was ethnically Irish, it does not necessarily mean that they had objections to service based on Irish historical grounds. In most cases this would have to be assumed rather than being a documented fact. There was also significant overlap between categories of objectors; plenty of Irish objectors for example were also socialists, while others were pacifists, or members of religious sects. Apart from a very limited review in 1919 by a “Religious Objectors Advisory Board”, there was scant interest from the authorities in why evaders took their stand.

Today the high proportion of New Zealand men of military age who served in WWI is often quoted as a point of pride – some 120,000 from a pool of about 240,000 eligible men. The numbers suggest that about half of the eligible who proved fit and able, went into uniform either voluntarily or after being conscripted. That still leaves the other half, who for whatever reason did not serve. That number is important when we consider the options available to those who were determined not to
become part of the war machine, no matter what. It meant that there was always a lot of men around New Zealand who looked like they maybe should be in the army but had legitimate grounds not to be. Their presence in such large numbers would have given excellent cover for those actively avoiding service. There were also large parts of the country that were difficult to access and often had transient populations of male workers in frontier-style camp situations that were hard to monitor. Official records of the hunt for evaders refer to the difficulty posed by such “backblocks” areas all over the country, often acknowledging the limited capacity of police to provide surveillance and identify military defaulters in these locations.16

Keeping tabs on people was also much more challenging given the limits of early 20th-century record-keeping. To remedy this, there had been a massive state effort to capture information on men liable for service in late 1915 through the National Registration census. In April 1916 police were instructed to assist with the detection and prosecution of men not registering under the National Registration Act. Once the registration exercise was adapted to serve the purposes of conscription, police efforts to enforce military call-ups were progressively ramped up. In February 1917, for example, the burden of proof was shifted to non-registered men to prove why they had not registered for military service. The next month police were instructed to begin checking any men that appeared eligible for military service to see if they were registered. Special attention was to be paid to theatres, race courses, billiard halls and factories. In July 1917 police were directed to begin raids to track down defaulters.

This work took up a considerable amount of police time. Files on individual evaders who were eventually captured give some hint of this. Denis Mangan, for example, was a Kerryman who had been in New Zealand since 1905. When he ‘disappeared’ after failing to appear for medical examination after call-up in March 1917 the police chased him for six months, from Taumarunui to Auckland to Balclutha. He was finally captured in Invercargill where he had assumed the name “Denis O’Sullivan”. Remaining defiant, he refused to submit to military authority and was sentenced to two years hard labour in November 1917.17 There is an even more extensive file documenting police efforts to track down Patrick Fitzpatrick, a self-employed cartage contractor from South Dunedin. First arrested in April 1917 after ignoring his call-up, Fitzpatrick ‘deserted’ from Trentham Military Camp the following December and destroyed his army uniform. He was captured at his aunt’s house in Ponsonby in March 1918 and sent to the Wanganui Detention Centre. He escaped from there and was hunted all over the country before being recaptured in Ponsonby in April 1919 and sentenced to 18 months hard labour.18

This level of police surveillance was only possible because of the decrease in standard police work relating to offences like drunkenness and other crimes typically committed by the thousands of single men who were now overseas. Yet much of the police effort to track down defaulters proved fruitless, even though police could claim a £1 reward for every deserter they captured. From the beginning of 1917 until the end of 1918, for example, there were 3019 arrest warrants listed in the Police Gazette that remained unexecuted.19 The vast majority of these, 2474, or 82% of them, were for military service related offences. Likewise, in April 1918 when police undertook a major operation to check the status of every man attending a race meeting at Trentham. Over two days the papers of 890 men were looked at but only six of them proved in any way questionable. A similar exercise at the Awapuni and Palmerston North races found not a single “shirker”.20 This suggests
that those in hiding were aware of the risk of exposure in a public place and were clever enough to avoid such locations.

**Evasion Strategies in Practice**

Evaders effectively had three options to avoid detection. They could ‘hide in plain sight’, usually by adopting an assumed name and moving to a location far from their home district. Or they could ‘go bush’, taking refuge in isolated or remote areas. Finally, they could head overseas, mainly to Australia but also as far afield as South America. All three evasion strategies required varying degrees of community support from networks of family or sympathisers and which possibly gave an edge to Irish Catholics who already formed a sub-culture within New Zealand society. Nonetheless sheltering evaders was obviously risky for all concerned and accordingly highly secretive behaviour, which obscures it in extant historical sources. There are fortunately a few documented cases of each of these evasion strategies, which can stand in for the stories of many more men whose difficult years in hiding cannot be described in such detail.

Jack and Bill Doyle offer an example of the first evasion strategy; moving to another part of the country and adopting an assumed name. Self-described as of “anti-British” Irish stock, the brothers were born in New Zealand to parents from Ennis in County Clare who had settled in Napier. In the pre-war years they were members of the New Zealand Freedom League, an organisation founded to oppose compulsory military training. Called up in March 1917, the brothers went into Trentham military camp but from there made good their escape and headed to the South Island’s West Coast. Jack took an engine-driving job under the name “Neil McCarthy” at Inchbonnie, an isolated hamlet on the railway line near Otira, while Bill worked for the Post and Telegraph Department in the same place as “J H Morton”. Bill was arrested at Otira in October 1917 and Jack was picked up soon after in Greymouth but managed to escape. He was recaptured at Otira and taken to the Buckle Street barracks in Wellington where Bill was already being held. Further escape attempts were foiled and the brothers each received a sentence of four months hard labour in November 1917.²¹

Interviewed about his WWI experiences by Patrick O’Farrell in 1970, Jack Doyle described the support offered to other evaders who elected to ‘go bush’ by the Donnellan family of Nelson Creek on the West Coast. The Donnellans were a prominent Catholic mining family whose patriarch, Patrick, also hailed from County Clare.

The Donnellan family of Nelson Creek set up a refuge for those seeking to avoid conscription. This consisted of a bush hut near the Donnellans: at one time there were 13 men living there and some of them lived there for up to two years. They were fed by the Donnellans and spent their time fossicking for gold in the area. It became known by word of mouth among radical and Irish circles that the West Coast was the place to go to evade conscription, and many with an Irish background gravitated to the West Coast and to the Donnellans.²²

Doyle also recalled that when he was captured at Otira, the Donnellans had apparently considered mounting a rescue to break him out but the police guard proved too formidable to risk the attempt. Remarkably the five Donnellan boys all managed to avoid military service themselves. Under Section 35 of the Military Service Act, men from families like theirs that failed to provide any voluntary recruits, could be targeted for call-up without their names coming up in a ballot. At least three of
the Donnellan boys received their call-up papers but each seems to have failed the medical examination, exempting them both from service and from any subsequent penalty.

The experience of another group who took refuge in the West Coast bush only became public after an accident to one of their number, Vince Carroll, who was struck on the head by a falling tree branch. He was one of seven sons born to parents from County Cork who farmed at Glen Oroua near Palmerston North and were prominent rugby players in Manawatu. With cousins involved in the struggle back in Ireland, the Carroll boys grew up with a strong sense of Irishness. Vincent, Frank and William were subject to some of the earliest arrest warrants for military defaulters when they failed to respond to their call-ups in February and March 1917. All went into hiding. Frank was subsequently caught in Fairlie, South Canterbury, as “Frank Brennan” and sentenced to two years hard labour for desertion. William Carroll was never caught but was penalised as a defaulter in 1919. Vince, meanwhile, had hidden out successfully with Tom Kiely and Pat Skinner in their bush camp on the West Coast, 12 miles from Ikamatua, from April until his fatal accident in November 1917. His two mates were arrested when they brought his body out to the road and reported his death in Reefton. Thomas Shanahan was subsequently prosecuted (unsuccessfully) for employing the three men as bush fellers and supplying them with food.23

Other locations are also remembered as sheltering evaders. There are anecdotal accounts of large numbers of Irish evaders finding shelter on the East Coast north of Napier. Many were supposedly helped to find labouring work on farms by way of the proprietor of the Royal Hotel in Gisborne, Joe Martin.24 Some support for this story is provided by a letter at National Archives that was intercepted by the authorities in 1919 and describes the experience of Dan Butler, an Irish evader from the Royal Hotel who had successfully made it to Australia:

I was in Brisbane at Easter and there I met Dannie Butler. You know him, big James Butler’s son of Dongonnell. He escaped from New Zealand during the conscription campaign, come to Sydney and from there to Brisbane, he is working 50 miles up in the Bush. He is looking well but doesn’t care much about Australia and is going back to New Zealand when things settle down. I think he had a rough time before he left New Zealand evading the Military authorities. He knew Shawn that used to teach Irish at Glenravel him and the sisters and father are out there. Shawn was also in hiding with them trying to escape conscription but they split up and he lost trace of them after that. He says Shawn and the family are all great Sinn Feiners of course it is only what you would expect of Shawn.25

The Wairarapa Age, meanwhile, reported public fears in mid-1918 that there were large numbers of armed evaders hiding out in remote areas near the military camps in that district.26 This may have been prompted by cases like that of Robert and John Larkin from Kawakawa. Captured stowing away on a ship to Australia in November 1917, the two brothers were in custody at Trentham military camp when they overpowered their guards and escaped in January 1918. They were recaptured in scrub-cutting camps at a sheep station near Martinborough with false papers and names five months later. In lieu of further detention the brothers agreed to go overseas with the 40th Reinforcement group but Robert deserted in South Africa as soon as their troop ship reached Capetown. John did his time in uniform in military camps in England, returning to New Zealand in 1919 without ever firing a shot in anger.27
“Shirkers Bush”, in the remote Mavora Lakes area of northern Southland, is supposed to have been so named for the bush camp where three of the Cody brothers hid out while being supplied with food by their mother, who brought supplies in by horse-drawn waggon from Tuatapere. The Codys were perhaps the most outstanding New Zealand fenians, with their own branch of the Maoriland Irish Society in rural Southland. There were two families, Patrick’s at Riversdale and Lawrence’s at Heddon Bush. The brothers had come to New Zealand via the United States in the 1870s. Between them they had eight sons who defied the conscription regulations and went ‘underground’. Patrick’s sons Michael, Lawrence, Patrick and John were all caught and served prison sentences. Patrick and John’s three-hour court martial in August 1917 was one of the few cases where the men’s motives were recorded for posterity, when the Green Ray reported their statement on “atrocities committed by troops in Ireland and Ireland’s enslaved condition”. Their brother Luke, meanwhile, managed to evade successfully, being last reported by Timaru police as being seen “on a chaff-cutter going towards Pleasant Point” in December 1919.

Lawrence Cody’s sons were more successful. Walter went to South America before conscription was introduced, though he died there during the influenza pandemic of 1918. His brother, Thomas, was a civil servant in Wellington and used his position to illicitly arrange a permit for his own departure to the United States. When conscription was introduced there too he moved on to Mexico. George, meanwhile, managed to evade successfully in New Zealand until war’s end as did John, a Cody cousin visiting from Ireland. Nine of the Codys thus made it onto the list of military defaulters published in 1919. All were subject to the civic penalties this imposed, including the three who had already served substantial prison sentences for their defiance. In after years, the Cody farm at Riversdale was often visited by men who had been on the run during the war, many of them veterans of West Coast hide-outs, suggesting perhaps that some of the Codys had also spent time there.

Heading overseas, as the Larkin brothers had tried to do and some of the Codys had succeeded at, is another indicator of the support networks that existed for military evaders. Information on this escape route is found in police records too. In March 1917, for example, the Green Ray manager Bert Ryan was reported to the police after being overheard in a Dunedin hotel offering to get someone away to Australia. He apparently boasted of having already succeeded in getting five or six men away through marine firemen smuggling them onto ships for a £10 fee. The police dismissed the story but it was this report that first prompted them to begin monitoring the Green Ray. A couple of months later, police reports to Wellington acknowledged that deserters were stowing away on ships with assistance from seamen and the military authorities sought greater assistance from Customs officers with ship searches. Jim Bradley’s brother, Bernard Bradley, was part of a group of five Irish stowaways on the Manuka to Australia in August 1918. A police tip-off led to the ship being searched in Sydney and the five evaders were discovered. They were returned to New Zealand where they faced charges varying from leaving New Zealand without a permit to desertion. Perhaps the most interesting detail, however, is that the men were found to have a large sum of money with them, evidence perhaps of financial support from sympathisers in New Zealand.

**Option Three: Defying Conscription**

Once captured, military service evaders came under great duress to serve as soldiers and some, like the Larkin brothers, agreed to do so. For those who continued their defiance, the stakes could
become very high. The most famous group to pay severely for their resistance are the fourteen conscientious objectors already referred to, who were shipped overseas on a troop ship in July 1917. Their story has become well known in modern times thanks to the memoir written by one of the men, Archibald Baxter. His book, *We Will Not Cease*, first published in 1939, has become a New Zealand anti-war classic. It tells in horrifying detail of the systematic abuse meted out to these men, most of whom ultimately submitted to what could realistically be described as state-sponsored torture and agreed to serve as stretcher bearers or infantrymen. Fortunately the experiment of shipping objectors to the front proved a public relations nightmare for the New Zealand authorities and was not repeated, although dozens more objectors were sent overseas.

The “Fourteen” included the general mix of pacifists, socialists and Irish objectors though unfortunately none apart from Baxter have really left us with any detailed account of their motivations. Two, however, were identified at the time as having Irish objections to military service. The first of these was Daniel Maguire, a Catholic labourer from Foxton who had been born in England to parents from County Derry. He had only been in New Zealand since 1915 and his next-of-kin was listed as his father in Derry so it could be inferred that he was close to contemporary developments in Ireland. Maguire had first spurned military service in April 1917 and endured repeated terms of detention as he maintained his stand through 1917. He remained resolute through the ill treatment meted out to the men aboard the troopship and through the increasing pressure to submit once they reached England. He was one of ten who continued to resist until they were sent on to France where they were subjected to further brutal treatment and threatened with being shot. Under this pressure, Maguire finally agreed to serve as a soldier and joined the 2nd Wellington Infantry Battalion in the field on 8 December 1917. He returned to New Zealand after the war and died in Auckland from tuberculosis in 1932.34

Eventually all fourteen of the group succumbed to illness, were broken in health or were forced to submit to some form of military service. As their numbers dwindled, the last few were subjected to a form of punishment that Baxter’s memoir has immortalised as the enduring symbol of their oppression, Field Punishment No 1. This standard military punishment involved the men being tied by their hands to a sloping post for a set number of hours per day for however many days of a sentence. As applied to the conscientious objectors, however, the ties forced them into a hanging position that cut off circulation in their hands and feet and caused unbearable pain. The last to hold out on the poles was Lawrence Kirwan, a plumber from Hokitika. He was the second “Irish” objector among the Fourteen. Kirwan did two 28-day stints of Field Punishment No 1., double the time that any other man in the group endured. Faced with the potential for an indefinite number of further stints on the pole, he finally agreed to serve as a stretcher bearer on 28 March 1918.35

There is no statement of the beliefs that underlay Kirwan’s incredible defiance. He never wrote a book and never wanted to talk about it after the war. When fellow veteran of Field Punishment No 1, Archie Baxter, passed through Hokitika in later years, Kirwan spurned a meeting.36 Family tradition, however, is that he refused to wear the King’s uniform because of what the British had done to the Irish. This suggests a ‘fenian’ family background, since, like the Codys, the Carrolls, the Doyles, the Larkins and numerous other ‘Irish’ objectors in WWI, Lawrence Kirwan was actually born in New Zealand, to Irish parents. In his case, his father’s place of origin was Clogherhead, County Louth, where the family still had close connections in the early 1900s. It is also pertinent that
Lawrence had served as a Territorial soldier before the war, which suggests that his opposition to the war was quite specifically against that war, not against military service in general.

**The Wanganui Nine’s “Determined Irishmen”**

Revelations that military objectors were being mistreated back in New Zealand as well emerged in early 1918. By then a special military detention centre had been established in Wanganui. Its commandant, Lieutenant Crampton, had taken upon himself the challenge of “breaking” his prisoners with brutal beatings until they agreed to serve. When some of the prisoners managed to smuggle out a letter detailing the treatment they had received, there was a significant outcry, led by family members and publicised by Labour Party leader Harry Holland. An official investigation followed, which detailed the involvement of three men described as “Irishmen” among a group that came to be called the “Wanganui Nine”. One of them was the same Patrick Fitzpatrick from South Dunedin, referred to above, whose escape from Wanganui meant that he was not available to give evidence to the enquiry. The treatment of his fellow inmates Thomas Moynihan and William Donovan, however, was central to the magisterial review.

Both men were New Zealand-born Irish. Moynihan was a gold-miner from Kumara on the West Coast with Irish parents, while Donovan was a flax-cutter from Wellington whose parents had been born in England. Yet both were described at the enquiry as “determined Irishmen” set on defying the military authorities. They also both had reputations as hard men:

> Donovan is said to have been a man who, in resisting capture, had fought with two policemen, and Moynihan is described as something of a pugilist. I am satisfied that it would take something more than moral suasion to reduce Moynihan to subjection if he had made up his mind to resist. Yet he and Donovan, in less than an hour, were transformed from determined and defiant objectors to obedient and well-conducted prisoners.37

Evidence was presented of exactly how Moynihan’s resistance had been broken at Wanganui:

> They brought him a uniform one Sunday morning and ordered him to dress in it. Of course, Tom was having none, so three or four hopped into him, and after handing out punches and kicks, one of which landed over the heart, and which he still feels the effects of, they put the uniform on him and ordered him two hours’ pack drill. He refused to carry a rifle and also refused to march, so they tied the gun to his side, and then started him off round the yard, by turns pushing, punching, kicking, and dragging him by the hair of his head. Whenever they pushed him off his feet, as they did on several occasions, they put the boot into him until he got up again. This sort of thing went on for over an hour, and the language of the whole crowd was absolutely disgusting.38

Photographic evidence also emerged of Moynihan undergoing the treatment described.39 Despite giving in and agreeing to serve in the military, neither Donovan nor Moynihan (nor Fitzpatrick once he was recaptured) was sent overseas to fight. Submission to the state was all that was required, after which home service posts were found for many such “defiant objectors”.

**Sinn Feiners**


Few of the New Zealand Irish who evaded or defied conscription have a voice in the historic record. It is rare to find any report of the philosophical positions that motivated their stands because these were usually omitted from press reports of their cases. There were some exceptions, however. When Thomas Spillane went before the Military Service Board in Napier in May 1917, for example, his Irish protestations against service were widely reported in what many newspapers described as “an unusual case”. Spillane denied being a British subject and refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the British Crown. He had only been in New Zealand for four years and was still supporting family back in Ireland. There were terse exchanges in the court with Spillane citing Irish misgovernment by the British but his “voluminous protestations” were cut short by the chairman of the Board who dismissed his case. The Green Ray noted in its report that Spillane had been supported by members of the Napier Moailand Irish Society who also presented him with a gold watch in appreciation of his stand.40

An even more explicit statement of Irish conscientious objection was published in the Green Ray in October 1917 when Tim O’Sullivan wrote to the magazine from his prison cell. Under the header “Sinn Feiner in detention in Wellington”, O’Sullivan recounted having been arrested at Maru Maru in Hawkes Bay in August but refusing to either make the oath of allegiance or wear a uniform. He reported that he was being held with 120 other objectors in the Wellington Barracks, with more coming in all the time. More importantly he stated his principles as a Sinn Fein supporter: “A soldier I shall never be: I’m a Sinn Feiner. There are a good few of them here so when I have served my 28 days solitary I will probably get 11 months or be put aboard a transport. I am going to stand by my convictions, and am prepared to suffer for doing so.”41

Another defiant Irishman whose stand was reported by the Green Ray was Tim Brosnan, a recent immigrant from County Kerry. He was described by the magazine as “an Irishman of the sturdy Republican order” when he became the first Green Ray subscriber to renew his annual subscription, especially since he did so from a prison cell. Called up in January 1917, Brosnan had left his home at Owhango, near Taumarunui, and headed south. Keeping ahead of the law for six months, he was finally caught at Winton in Southland in August 1917. After stints in detention in Dunedin and Wellington he went on trial at Trentham and had a chance to proclaim his beliefs: “I said I was an Irishman, a Sinn Feiner and refused to fight for a country that had prosecuted and murdered my country and my people for hundreds of years.” 42 Time in jail did nothing to cool Brosnan’s Republican ardour. Supported by his wife, “also a Sinn Feiner” his letters to family members in Queensland from prison were subsequently intercepted by military censors in Australia who were shocked by their contents:

Dear sister Maggie … you know how long ago I was sentenced to two years hard labor in a New Zealand prison, because I would not shame my good parents name or become a traitor to my country, by donning a uniform and taking an oath of allegiance to fight and die for my greatest enemy and oppressor and tyrant of my native land …”43

The Brisbane military censor wrote to his New Zealand counterparts that Brosnan’s correspondence was of a type that “would inflame the disloyalty rampant in North Queensland”. He pointedly suggested that “there should be some supervision of the writings of men of this type.”

How many?
Paul Baker, in his classic study of conscription, *King and Country Call*, suggested that the number of men who evaded military service in New Zealand, or who failed to even register for it in the first place, could be anywhere between 3,900 and 8,500. Of these he further estimated that between 2,800 and 6,400 were never found by the authorities. The Minister of Defence released a press statement in October 1918 that acknowledged the scale of the problem his department had faced in tracking “shirkers”:

> The general public has but a faint conception of the mass of work that has fallen upon the Defence Department (or at least the particular Branch responsible) in connection with absentees, deserters, shirkers and military defaulters of all colours, creeds and nationalities, who from various causes – some accidental but more often deliberately and wilfully engineered – have failed to concentrate at appointed times and places.44

The statement quoted a figure of 10,460 men who had failed to appear for call-up, though departmental action had subsequently tracked down 8,352 of them. Warrants for the arrest of the remainder had been issued with most still unexecuted at war’s end. This did not account for the thousands who had kept their names out of the data pool by not registering their details in 1915.

At the end of the war, additional penalties were imposed on the 2,155 men that the government could positively identify as military defaulters, men who had failed to appear for medical inspection, attend camp or had deserted after attestation. Their names were printed in the *New Zealand Gazette* in 1919. About a quarter of the names on this list, just over 500, bear surnames that suggest an Irish heritage. This is a much higher proportion than the Irish-motivated objectors among the 286 men who ended up in prison, which has been estimated at about 10%.45 It is tempting to see this as evidence of successful evasion and a tribute perhaps to the Irish networks that supported men on the run. However you cut the figures, there were a lot of men – thousands - who defied the conscription regulations in New Zealand during WWI and sought to avoid military service.46 As the individual stories above attest, Irish men (both Irish-born and Irish ethnics) were notable among them.

**Seán Brosnahan, Toitū Otago Settlers Museum**

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1 Details on Irish migration can be found at http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/irish/


4 New Zealand Provost Marshalls War Diary, National Archives [hereafter N.A.].

5 Military service record, 54034 Jeremiah Griffin, N.A. See also, *The Colonist*, 18 April 1917.

6 Military Service Record, 61728, F.J. McKenna, N.A.

7 Ibid. A more elaborate account of McKenna’s experiences drawing on family stories is included in a thesis prefaced as “a work of creative non-fiction” by Kerry Casey, “The Diggers and the IRA: A story of Australian and New Zealand Great-War soldiers involved in Ireland’s War of Independence”. M.A. thesis, University of New South Wales, 2014.

8 *Waikato Times*, 8 August 1917 and *New Zealand Police Gazette*, 1917. Both men were already military defaulters. Following his release in April 1918 O’Neill was called up again and deserted. Captured in October he went into camp and died at Trentham there during the influenza pandemic in November 1918. See URL: https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/john-oneill-sedition, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 6-May-2016.

10 Details on Cummins’ background supplied to the author by his nephew, the late Monsignor Bryan Walsh, along with his essay about his uncle’s experiences, “Irish Felon in New Zealand”, 1998.


12 Information supplied to the author by Bradley’s daughter Katherine Craig and McCarthy’s son, the late Cormac McCarthy, 1994.

13 Information on Sean Tohill supplied to the author by family members, Peter and Hugh Tohill, 1995, and Tobias Tohill, 2016.

14 The Green Ray reported him as saying to the court, “the Sinn Fein cause was his, and as a loyal Sinn Feiner he could only bear sworn allegiance to one cause”. Green Ray, September 1917.

15 A useful point of comparison would be the small I.R.B. circle that existed within the Irish National Association in Australia and held a secret military training camp in the Blue Mountains in 1916-17. See Patrick O’Farrell, The Irish in Australia, revised edition, (N.S.W.) 1993, pp 273-274.

16 Memorandum for the Commissioner of Police from the Director of Personal Services, 26 October 1917. N.A.

17 Military service record, 65251, Denis Mangan. N.A.

18 Military service record, 65167, Patrick Fitzpatrick, N.A.

19 This figure is based on my count of notices in the New Zealand Police Gazette and does not necessarily allow for subsequent cancellations and amendments to warrants. An official return of warrants outstanding as at 31 December 1918 gives a figure of 1906. “Personnel – Military Defaulters list – general file”. AD1 780, N.A.


21 Military service records, 49271 William Thomas Doyle, and 51143 John Steven Doyle, N.A.

22 Record of interview, Jack Doyle speaking to Patrick O’Farrell, August 1970. Personal communication to the author by the late Professor Patrick O’Farrell, 2006.

23 “When Rugby Went to War” in Manawatu Standard, 28 April 2015. See also Manawatu Times, 14 February 1917; Feilding Star, 27 October 1917; Star, 5 November 1917; Grey River Argus, 22 January 1918.

24 Personal communication to the author by Dean Parker, 2000.

25 Postal Censorship of J to Mrs J O’Brien, May, AD10 Box 10/19/24, N.A. My thanks to Jared Davidson for sending me this reference, personal communication, 2016. Dan Butler’s name appears on the 1919 list of Military Defaulters with the Royal Hotel, Gisborne, as his address. He had been called up in a ballot in June 1918.

26 Wairarapa Age, 8 June 1918.

27 Military service records, 62700, John Larkin and 62701, Robert Ernest Larkin, N.A. See also Auckland Star, 5 December 1917; Tuapeka Times, 12 January 1918; Otago Daily Times, 11 July 1918; and Grey River Argus, 20 July 1918.


29 Green Ray, September 1917.


31 Information from Cody family history given to the author by Patrick Cody, 1999.

32 Memo 24/188, New Zealand Military Forces Headquarters, 31 May 1917, AD1 780, N.A. New Zealand Herald, 29 August 1918; The Dominion, 29 August 1918; and Northern Advocate, 31 August 1918.

33 Military service record, 52356, Daniel Maguire. N.A.

34 Military service record, 53669, Lawrence Joseph Kirwan, N.A. Additional information from Lawrence’s nephew Peter Kirwan, 2016.


36 New Zealand Truth, 14 December 1918.


38 Photos at National Archives in AAYS 8638, AD1 Box 738/10/566 Part 2. N.A.

39 GR, June 1917.
41 Ibid., August 1917.
42 Ibid., January 1918. Additional information on Tim Brosnan from his great grand-daughter Veronica O’Grady, 2016.
43 Censorship of correspondence, T Brosnan to Mrs M McCarthy April-December, AD10 Box 10/ 19/5, N.A.
44 “For publication in Press”, 9 October 1918. AD1 780, N. A.
46 See also the tabulation by Jared Davidson, “Dissent during the First World War: by the numbers” June 2016, URL: http://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2016/06/28/dissent-during-the-first-world-war-by-the-numbers/