Transporting Rebellion: How the motorcar shaped the Rising

By Dr Leanne Blaney

As motorcars sped members of the Secret Military Council towards Liberty Hall on Easter Sunday, few could have imagined that their next motor journey would be by military lorry – when their bodies were taken for burial to Arbour Hill after their execution. However, one obvious certainty – even among the confusion of Easter Sunday – was that motor vehicles, specifically the car would play a pivotal role during the upcoming Rising. Historiography relating to the Easter Rising tends to focus on the personalities, places and politics involved in the rebellion. Yet, we can gain a new perspective on the Rising, when we choose to assess more mundane aspects of the uprising. Understanding the role played by the motorcar as the Irish Volunteers prepared for the Rising and the manner in which cars were utilised by the British authorities and Irish civilians caught up in the six days of fighting alongside the Volunteers, allows us to recognise how the car acted as an agent for change during the conflict.

By 1916, motorcars had become an accepted mainstay of Irish life for a variety of reasons. Firstly, they were relatively familiar sights on Irish roads. Two years earlier, in April 1914, the Irish Local Government Board had estimated that 19,554 motorised vehicles (predominantly motorcars and motorcycles) were registered within Ireland.[1] While the outbreak of the First World War did witness a reduction in the number of motor vehicles registered on Irish roads as motorists and motor fuel became scarce, motorcars remained relatively plentiful, especially around Dublin. This was because many of them were utilised to transport wounded soldiers from war ships moored in Dublin's quay to military hospitals and convalescence homes. The Irish Automobile Club (IAC) and their members, which included the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and Sir John Boyd Dunlop (inventor of the pneumatic rubber wheel), were heavily involved in the organisation and recruitment of motorcars to act as Red Cross ambulances both within Ireland and abroad on European battlefields. By the end of the First World War in 1918, it was estimated that over the course of the four previous years, the twenty

[1] National Archives of Ireland, CSO RP 1914, 16972 (Available via *Century Ireland* http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/validity-of-motor-tax-queried)

ambulances active in Dublin (in addition to an unverified number of private cars) had transported over 24,000 wounded soldiers across Ireland.[2]

Secondly, by 1916 car ownership and usage was becoming increasingly democratic. Following the introduction of the car to Ireland in 1896, car ownership remained largely restricted to the prosperous classes because the average motorcar cost in the region of £500 – £1,000.[3] Early motorists and those who availed of motor transport had tended to be wealthy men, usually medical doctors who valued cars as vehicles for utility or wealthy former competitive cyclists who were keen to acquire even greater speeds than those possible on a traditional bicycle. However, twenty years on, this tradition had begun to be challenged. With the absence of many male family members, female motorists became increasingly apparent on Irish roads as Irish women chose to pursue driving careers so as not to be deprived of their motoring freedom. The deaths of many Irish motorists serving at the front also led to a number of public auctions where the deceased's motor was auctioned off to either raise funds for the family left behind or to raise funds for the war effort. Consequently, people who could not have afforded to purchase a new motorcar, were able to procure one at these auctions. In terms of usage, charabancs (open-topped motor coaches), had become increasingly popular in the latter years of Edwardian Ireland as the Irish Tourist Association (ITA) encouraged motoring excursions in Ireland. Charabancs, alongside ordinary motor taxis, were widely available within urban areas, specifically Dublin, and motor garage owners, such as the Dublin firm Messrs. Thompson, recognised the financial benefits of providing less wealthy members of society with a motor-for-hire service. As a result, members of the general public now had the opportunity to hire cars publicly or privately, when they desired to travel a distance, celebrate an occasion or just arrive in style.

Thirdly, the ongoing First World War highlighted the car's superiority over other modes of transport. Newspaper coverage of daring motoring exploits, including the role played by cars during the Battle of the Marne in September 1914[4] and the rescue

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[2] Smith, *The History of the Royal Irish Automobile Club*, p. 61

[3] Figures derived from contemporary advertisements placed in newspapers such as the *Irish Times* and motoring journals including the *Motor News.*

[4] Henri Isselin, *The Battle of the Marne,* (London, 1964), pp 179-191. A variety of motorcars including racing cars, limousines and 250 Parisian motor taxis were employed by the French

of 89 British prisoners of war during the Egyptian Senussi campaign in April 1916, reinforced the idea that cars were capable of almost unimaginable feats.[5] Of course, thanks to the gun-running episodes of 1914, Ireland was already aware of the significant advantages cars could offer to any campaign – as well as the tragic consequences of not utilising cars effectively. In April 1914 during the Ulster Volunteer Force's (UVF) Larne gun-running, the UVF motor corps had successfully collected and transported an estimated 35,000 rifles and five million rounds of ammunition in 600 cars throughout Ireland over the course of a twenty-four hour period.[6] However, Bulmer Hobson's reluctance to utilise motorcars during the Irish Volunteer Force's (IVF) Howth gun-running episode in July 1914, because he wished the event to become what Marnie Hay has termed 'a highly successful publicity stunt' can feasibly be credited as one of the determining factors which resulted in the deaths of three people and the wounding of thirty-eight.[7] Not to mention, the subsequent difficulty that arose out of transporting 1,500 rifles and a large quantity of the 45,000 rounds of ammunition by foot on the 10 mile hike back to Dublin. In contrast, the use of a charabanc and a small number of privately owned cars during the smaller IVF Kilkeel gun-running staged in August 1914 by Sean Fitzgibbon proved much more successful. 600 rifles and 20,000 rounds of ammunition were unloaded from the *Chotah* under the cover of darkness and heavy rain and successfully sped away to Patrick Pearse's Rathfarnham school, St. Enda's. This was in spite of the fact that the rear axle of the hired charabanc broke due to overloading. Joseph Rossney, the driver of the charabanc, would later recall in the witness statement that he gave to the Bureau of Military History, that he had to summon a lorry and several motor taxis to transport the charabanc's load away from the scene of the breakdown ahead of the arrival of a police patrol to inspect the broken down vehicle.[8]

Unsurprisingly then, given this final success, the organisers of the 1916 Easter Rising were convinced that the car should play an important role during the preparations for

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army to transport 4,000 foot soldiers and their supplies over thirty miles so they could support the French army stationed at Benz.

[5] *Irish Independent*, 22 April 1916

[6] PRONI, T2665/1, Newspaper cuttings related to the method in which the gun-running's were carried out, April 1914.

[7] Marnie Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the Nationalist Movement in Twentieth-Century Ireland*, (Manchester, 2009), p. 161.

[8] Bureau of Military History Collection, Document No W.S. 112, Joseph Rossney's Witness Statement, 1913 – 1921.

and the course of the insurrection. Indeed, cars, such as the one owned by Countess Plunkett but utilised regularly by her son, Joseph Plunkett often transported the members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood's secret military council to and from their meetings. Cars were also used to help strengthen links between the leaders based in Dublin such as Seán Mac Diarmada, and his regional counterparts. Witness statements collected by the Bureau of Military History offer an insight into the miles regularly covered by members of the Irish Volunteers and the IRB in the months leading up to the Rising as preparations were afoot. Though trains and bicycles were typically the more popular mode of transit, when a journey required a degree of covertness and urgency, cars or motorcycles were always the vehicles of choice. Motorcycles also played a significant role during the planning stages of the Rising, especially in rural Ireland. Eamon O'Dwyer recalled that the activities of the Irish Volunteers in Co. Tipperary were greatly aided by the fact that many of the officers in charge, such as Volunteer O/C for Tipperary Pierce McCann who owned a motorcycle.[9]

In the weeks leading up to the Rising, cars were chiefly employed to transport arms and ammunition between safe houses. A court case reported in the *Irish Times*, on 14 April 1916, effectively illustrated one such ill-fated journey. The case concerned two Wexford men, Joseph Kenny, a chauffeur and Patrick Doyle, a labourer, who had been found on College Green by the Dublin Military Police (DMP) to be transferring arms and ammunition by car without a permit. On searching the motorcar, owned by a Rev. Father Murphy, the DMP found eight new American shotguns, four revolvers, several rounds of magazine rifle ammunition, ten home-forged bayonets and a significant quantity of revolver ammunition. On the persons of the two prisoners, the DMP also discovered documents which instructed that the bearers of the documents should be given specific quantities of arms and ammunition for which the bearer had apparently paid for at 'the General Council Meeting'. Ironically, while both men were charged, the authorities were relatively non-plussed about the discovery of such a cargo, deriding the quality of weapons being conveyed as 'farcical'.[10] Later in the month, even the tragic deaths of three unknown men when their car plunged off Ballykissane pier into Castlemain harbour during the night of Good Friday, which

[9] Bureau of Military History Collection, Document No W.S. 1403, Eamon O' Duibhir, 1913-1921
[10] *Irish Times,* 14 April 1916

was reported in the national newspapers on Easter Monday, did little to raise the authorities suspicions of the events which would shortly unfold.[11]

It had been anticipated that cars would play a central role in the conveyance of arms that Roger Casement was to land off the German ship, the *Aud* from Fenit to Tralee on Good Friday. Therefore to avoid detection, cars from outside of Kerry had been sourced and fitted with Kerry number plates. However these plans were thrown into disarray when Roger Casement decided to come ashore on the night of 20 April and his dinghy overturned. The Irish Volunteers Tralee Battalion Commandant, Austin Stack and Cornelius Collins, a Dublin IRB man, drove from Tralee to Ballyheigue in the hope of rescuing Casement. Unfortunately they met with the local RIC force who had already arrested Casement. Suspicious of why a local Irish Volunteer commander would be driving around in the early morning with an unknown Dublin man in rural Kerry, the two were arrested. When news of the arrests reached Séan Mac Diarmada, he immediately gave orders that wireless equipment would be stolen from Cahirciveen's wireless station and taken to Tralee where it would be reassembled and used to establish contact with the *Aud*, (the Volunteers were under the mistaken impression that the German ship carried wireless equipment). Two Limerick cars, a new American Brisco owned by John J. Quilty and a Maxwell owned by garage owner Tommy McInerney were dispatched to Kerry to collect the five men who had been sent from Dublin to carry out these orders. However, neither driver was familiar with the Kerry peninsula and after stopping to ask for directions, the car driven by McInerney took a wrong turn at Killorglin and plunged into the sea. McInenery survived but his three passengers perished. Ignorant of the accident, the other car – driven by munitions worker Samuel Windrim – continued on their journey until they were outside Killorglin where they became concerned that the other car's lights had failed to appear. Realising that something was amiss, the decision was made to abandon the mission and the Brisco returned to Limerick.[12]

Undoubtedly, the three high-profile arrests, the deaths of Conn Keating, Donal Sheahan and Charlie Monaghan, as well as the failure to establish contact with the *Aud* had significant repercussions on the subsequent insurrection. Desmond Ryan argued that on a local scale, the Ballykissane tragedy effectively 'psychologically

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[11] *Irish Independent*, 24 April 1916

[12] BMH Collection, Document No. W.S. 516, Witness Statement John J. Quilty, 1913-21

paralysed' Kerry for the rest of Easter Week.[13] On a national scale, news of the unfortunate series of events prompted Eoin MacNeill to order the abolition of planned mobilisations for Easter Sunday. Couriers were immediately sent out on Easter Saturday night to call a halt to the planned proceedings. This included the O'Rahilly who having been unwell during the week prior to the Rising, felt it unwise to drive himself in his De Dion car and instead summoned an 'A & B' taxi to drive him around Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary, where he called on many Volunteer commanders who were already in the midst of final preparations for Sunday.[14] Other couriers, desperate to deliver their message, employed rather less lawful methods in order to avail of motor transport. In the course of the Rising, Anne Higgins, a member of Cumann na mBan who had spent a number of days cooking in the Hibernian Bank was sent with a message to Armagh. On reaching Armagh, she realised she could travel no further as military restrictions meant many scheduled trains were no longer running. Higgins therefore 'obtained' a motorcar and travelled to 'Bailieboro, Kilnaleck, Ballinagh and Cavan' before being arrested for her efforts.[15]

MacNeill's official countermand order, which appeared in the Easter Sunday edition of the *Irish Independent*, led to the cancellation of many Volunteer manoeuvres and as a consequence many car journeys. Various Irish Volunteers, including Anne Cashel of Cork had been charged with organising sufficient numbers of cars to transport their provincial Volunteer branch members to Dublin city centre on Easter Sunday.[16] However, when it appeared that the Rising had been called off, these plans were cancelled. Consequently, the 1,000 Volunteers who assembled at various meeting points across Cork on Easter Sunday simply disbanded in the early evening and returned home.[17] Still, when it became apparent that the Rising would go ahead on Easter Monday, motorcars conveyed numerous influential figures into Dublin so they could join the rebellion. Among them was nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell who eventually delivered the surrender to the British military and was photographed standing alongside Patrick Pearse at the moment of the Volunteer's official surrender. She had

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13 Desmond Ryan, *The Rising: The complete story of Easter Week,* (Dublin, 1957) pp 112-114

14 UCDA, P102/541 (8), The O'Rahilly Papers. Letter written to Max Caulfield from Aodhagán O'Rahilly, 13 April 1964.

15 Ruth Tallion, *The Women of 1916,* pp 80-81

16 Tallion, *The Women of 1916,* p. 34

17 Shane Hegarty and Fintan O'Toole, *The Irish Times Book of the 1916 Rising*, (Dublin, 2006), p. 36

been sent by Pearse to Athenry on Easter Monday with a message but her return journey had been stalled at Mullingar as the military invoked security measures in response to the outbreak of violence in Dublin. Eager to return to the action, she paid the considerable sum of £2 to get a lift by motorcar back to the capital.[18]

The Volunteer's initial success on Easter Monday has been accredited less to their tactical prowess and more to the lack of military presence on the streets of Dublin during the Bank holiday morning and afternoon. Again, cars contributed greatly to this state of affairs, as many of the city's taxis and privately owned cars had transported key military figures (as well as countless foot soldiers) to the Fairyhouse horse races. Even British Petroleum's Irish managing director, Ernest Jordison, had taken the opportunity to hire 'the best motor car in Dublin' to take his friends to the Irish Grand National at Fairyhouse.[19] Many of the Volunteers had been ignorant of this however and their spirits were buoyed as they set out on their campaign by the mistaken belief that the city's taxis had either been 'commandeered by our men' or that the 'British had heard of the plans and commandeered them'.[20] Their ignorance, proved costly. The mission to raid the British Magazine Fort in Phoenix Park, relied heavily on the commandeering of a car to transport the British Army's arms from the site. Volunteer officer Tom Roche had been charged with securing the car, but in his excitement he crashed the vehicle and had to resort to commandeering a horse and hackney car to complete the job, after he realised the scarcity of motor taxis on Easter Monday morning.[21] The scarcity of cars within the city was exacerbated when Volunteers decided to construct a barricade across Hatch Street using cars commandeered from the Earlsfort Terrace motor garage.[22]

When the Rising got underway, two cars of heavily utilised by the Volunteers were the O'Rahilly's green De Dion and Dr Kathleen Lynn's motorcar. The De Dion was used to transport supplies and messages to and from the GPO during the first few days. When the fighting intensified later in the week, it was removed from the GPO's

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18 Tallion, *The Women of 1916,* p. 45

19 Hegarty and O'Toole, *The Irish Times: Book of the 1916 Rising*, p. 39

20 UCDA, P102/601, The O'Rahilly Papers, *Desmond FitzGerald's Memoirs of the Rising,* Undated.

21 BMH Collection, Document No. W.S. 328, Witness Statement of Gearoid Ua h-Uallachain, 1913-1921

22 Frank Robbins, *Under the Starry Plough: Recollections of the Irish Citizen Army* (Dublin, 1979), p. 91

enclosed courtyard and used in a barricade on Prince Street, where it was eventually burned.[23] Dr. Kathleen Lynn's car actually managed to survive the Rising and was returned to her some months later. Originally intended to facilitate Lynn's own movement around the various garrisons as a Captain and medical officer, her chauffeur Countess Markievicz abandoned her at City Hall and drove off to join the fighting in St. Stephen's Green.[24]

The authorities eager to suppress the Rising as quickly as possible, also made effective use of cars. Famously, the Easter Rising has been remembered in history as arguably the first time the British army used armoured vehicles. Some of these vehicles had been improvised by mounting disused boilers from the railway companies and the Guinness brewery on to a Leyland chassis. Guinness lorries had also been converted into makeshift armoured vehicles.[25] The excitement of such ingenuity was not lost on the Volunteers, as Dick Humphrey's recounted how the rumour that an armoured car could be seen approaching the GPO from Henry Street prompted many to 'show themselves insanely at the window to obtain a view'.[26] The military also relied on more traditional motorcars and Brigadier General Lowe would later commend the military drivers who struggled to keep their passengers safe as the staff cars travelled through the war-torn city centre. In the days following the Volunteers surrender, these staff cars would transport many of the families and friends of those imprisoned to and from the city's jails. Cars were also utilised outside of Dublin by the RIC in an effort to maintain peace and prevent further insurrection breaking out. In Ashbourne for instance a column of approximately 55 RIC officers arrived in 17 cars having been sent from barracks in Slane to reinforce those defending the RIC barracks at Ashbourne which was being raided by Volunteers lead by Thomas Ashe. In the gun fight which lasted around five hours, the RIC lost eight men, including two of their civilian chauffeurs.[27]

Ultimately, it was civilians who utilised cars to the greatest extent over the course of the six days of fighting. Doctors and nurses as well as ordinary civilians volunteered

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[23] W.J. Brennand- Whitmore, *The Easter Rising from Behind the Barricades,* (Dublin, 1996), p. 40

[24] Ann Matthews, *Renegades Irish Republican Women 1900-1922,* (Cork, 2010) p. 127

[25] See Padraig Yeates, *A City in Wartime Dublin, 1914-18* (Dublin, 2011), p. 105 and Hegarty and O'Toole, *The Irish Times: Book of the 1916 Rising*, p. 105

[26] Hegarty and O'Toole, *The Irish Times: Book of the 1916 Rising*, p. 106

[27] Hegarty and O'Toole, *The Irish Times: Book of the 1916 Rising*, p. 115

their cars to transport the wounded and dying from the battle-torn streets to the relative safety of Dublin's hospitals. Often they put themselves and their vehicles at great risk. Holden Stodart, Superintendant of the voluntary St. John Ambulance Brigade was among the first casualties of the Rising as he assisted stretcher-bearers carrying a wounded soldier to the Royal City of Dublin hospital. This was because although the medical personnel, including the St. John Ambulance Brigade and the IAC ambulance service operated under the auspices of the Red Cross, many of those involved took orders from the Royal Army Medical Corps. Consequently, in the eyes of the Volunteers, they were legitimate targets.[28] Though the official motor vehicles, such as the Dublin-Fire Brigade's ambulance performed admirably during the Rising, the restrictions on movement across the city meant civilian cars frequently had to be relied upon to transport many of the 3,073 casualties.[29]

Cars had been favoured all along by the IRB Secret Military Council because they ensured autonomy and a degree of anonymity. In the final hours of the Rising, as Pearse travelled by car to meet General Maxwell and later as fourteen of the 'guilty' men awaited execution in Kilmainham Jail, cars continued to assure their passengers – be they friend or foe – the same reassurance. The Rising may have altered a great deal, but by its conclusion, the status of the car as an agent for change was merely reinforced. Though not necessarily acknowledged aloud, there can be no question that those involved in the Rising recognised the key role played by the car as both medic and mercenary during Easter Week. Without cars, key figures would have been absent from the conflict; the movement of both the Volunteers and the military would have been greatly curtailed and the tenuous communication links between Dublin and the rest of Ireland impaired even further than they already were. While it would be inaccurate to argue that the use of cars definitively contributed to the eventual outcome of the Rising, their utilisation certainly impacted upon the events that unfolded. Moreover given the subsequent eagerness of Irish Volunteers to commandeer cars during the War of Independence and the Civil War, the assumption can be made that in the wake of the Rising, Nationalists were convinced of the car's ability to act as an effective agent for change.

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[28] Yeates, *A City in Wartime Dublin 1914-18*, p. 110

[29] Brendán Mac Giolla Choille, *Intelligence Notes 1913-1916*, (Dublin, 1966), p. 238